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ABSTRACT

This publication examines a study of cultural exchange within a fifth grade classroom, presenting case studies of three children and their families and the relationships they developed with the teacher, the ethnographer, and the school community. The study examined teachers, students, and families who drew lessons from interacting with one another and using those lessons to improve and enrich the ways in which they approached the world. Researchers examined interchange in the classrooms and school communities, focusing on occasions when students brought their cultural perspectives into the collective discourse or teachers represented their own world views or the knowledge of institutional culture, their sense of school, to students or families. The school under study was located in a very poor district, and most of the students were Hispanic or African American. After regularly observing one fifth grade classroom and visiting with students and families, the researcher concluded that each student had a unique story, though in most of the stories, the process of interchange unfolded in a similar pattern (setting the stage, building trust relationships, getting to know each other, building bridges, and self-expression at school). The process of cultural exchange did not proceed nearly as far with some students as it did with others. (Contains 32 references.) (SM)

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ED 437 449

# *Building School-Family Partnerships in a South Bronx Classroom*

**David Bensman**

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*The Series on Cultural Interchange*

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## Titles in the Series on Cultural Interchange

**David Bensman**

***Building School-Family Partnerships in a South Bronx Classroom***

This study of a fifth grade classroom presents three children and their families and the relationships they developed with the teacher, the ethnographer, and the school community, ranging from intense and collaborative to distant and fearful. The study explores the process of cultural interchange between the school and the families.

**Kathe Jervis**

***Between Home and School: Cultural Interchange in an Elementary Classroom***

This study of a second/third grade classroom in a parent-founded school follows a child from a religious family who travels a long distance, both geographically and psychologically, from home to school. The study tries to understand the distances some children must travel between home and the classroom and the influences they encounter along the way.

**Kemly A. McGregor**

***Cultural Interchange in a Bronx High School: Three Children***

This is a study of a small high school's attempt to create an intellectual culture that draws on and validates the realities of its students. While the school has been successful in reaching those children whose assumptions and values mirror its own, it still struggles to find a point of connection with those children who do not share those values.

**Jianzhong Xu**

***Reaching Out to Other People's Children in an Urban Middle School: The Families' Views***

This study documents four families' reactions to the experiences their children encounter at school, showing how the families' interpretations are shaped by their perceptions of the roles played by the school, the parents, and the children, and how these perceptions are further mediated by their racial consciousness, class, and the gender of their children.

The National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching (NCREST) was created to document, support, connect, and make lasting the many restructuring efforts going on throughout the nation. NCREST's work builds concrete, detailed knowledge about the intense and difficult efforts undertaken in restructuring schools. This knowledge is used to help others in their attempts at change, to begin to build future education programs for school practitioners, and to promote the policy changes that will nurture and encourage needed structural reforms. The Center brings together many voices: those of practitioners and researchers, parents and students, policy makers and teacher educators.

NCREST is supported by a major grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. NCREST's work in New York City, through its center for School Reform, is supported by the Leon Lowenstein Foundation and the Aaron Diamond Foundation. Other funders have included the Carnegie Corporation, the Center for Collaborative Education, the Danforth Foundation, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Fund for New York City Public Education, Impact II, the Lilly Endowment, Inc., the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the Metropolitan Life Foundation, the National Center for Research on Vocational Education, the New York Community Trust, the New York State Department of Education, the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northwest and Islands, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

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# Building School-Family Partnerships in a South Bronx Classroom

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# Preface to the Series on Cultural Interchange

In 1996, our NCREST-based team, dismayed by the inadequate educational progress of too many children in our country's public schools, began the research project reported in this monograph series. Various theories purported to shed light on the American dilemma of how to educate children outside the mainstream; some of the theories we agreed with, others we didn't. One explanation, which intrigued us because it raised issues for which we had no answers, was that cultural barriers between home and school stood in the way of educational progress, especially for poor children and children of color (Comer, 1993; Delpit, 1995; Fine, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1994; Poplin & Weeres, 1993; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Herbert Kohl in his book, *I Won't Learn From You!: The Role of Assent in Learning* (1991), put the matter most starkly when he said that some African-American and Latino children refused to learn in school because they believed that participating in the educational process meant accepting a cultural system that categorized them as inferior.

While there was something in this literature that rang true, we weren't sure how to connect it with our experience in public schools that were engaging poor and minority students in innovative learning communities (Bensman, 1994; Jervis, 1996; Snyder et al., 1992). In these schools, researchers saw evidence that most children acquired the skills and knowledge they needed to succeed in higher education, the world of work, and within their communities; they did not seem to choose between school and family. What made it possible for children in these schools to cross cultural boundaries? This question piqued our curiosity.

So we began our study.[1] Our four-person research team conceptualized the classroom as the most appropriate place to observe what we called "cultural interchange." We began by defining cultural interchange as the process by which members of groups with different traditions, values, beliefs, and experiences gained a greater degree of mutual understanding. We were looking for examples where teachers, students, and families drew lessons from each other and used those lessons to improve and enrich the ways they approached the world. We had our eyes open for instances

[1]This work is supported by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement Field-initiated grant #R306F60079. The perspectives represented here are our responsibility, not the granting agency.

where study participants were willing to accept some measures of disequilibrium, to shift or expand their worldview a little, to occasionally have their assumptions upset, and to tolerate the uncertainty that accompanies encounters with strangers.

We did not mean culture to be a code word for race. In thinking about culture, elements of behavior and mind-set produced by ethnic identification most readily spring to mind, but we assumed ethnic identification was only one of many aspects of culture. Ideas of what is valuable, what is beautiful, or what is successful are defined not only by ethnicity but by other factors such as social class, age, religion, race, and geographic locale. Culture, as it plays out in classrooms and schools, is complex and multifaceted, and we expected the interchange of culture between teachers and students, teachers and parents, and students among themselves to draw on all of these elements—although not always, and not always at the same time.

We began by looking at interchange in classrooms and school communities—with all the power differentials that implies—to capture and render a concept whereby teachers, students, and families learned from each other and integrated elements of each other's mind-frames into their own views of the world. We each pursued the idea of cultural interchange in our own way, and each of our studies took a divergent route. We ultimately drew differing conclusions about the usefulness of cultural interchange as a concept.

Each researcher worked in a different school. Although we predicated our research design on each setting's uniqueness and only loosely coupled our work to each other, we recognized that learning to overcome our own biases and take off our own blinders was essential. Capitalizing on our various backgrounds (academic researchers and former teachers, men and women, American and foreign-born, Asian, European, and African-American), we planned strategies to make ourselves more open to the cultural repertoire of students, families, and school personnel. While we individually analyzed our own data and wrote our own drafts, we collectively developed questions and concepts from which we could all draw. We visited each others' schools, watched videotapes of team members' study sites, and jointly interviewed personnel from each of the sites. Over time, we grew increasingly impressed by how differently we perceived and understood student behavior and classroom practice.

We chose schools to encompass a spectrum of student ages and, we hoped, educational practices. Access to the schools was a crucial determinant for our selection. Our presence as ethnographers was bound to be intrusive, so we selected only schools where we were known by someone on the staff. Using various ethnographic methods, each of us spent the academic year with teachers who were ready to open themselves up to the scrutiny required by this research. After spending some time at our site, we asked several students and their parents to participate in our study. We paid teachers and families for cooperating. Soon we were accompanying students to after-school activities and into their homes, churches, and communities.

Our observations focused on occasions when students brought their cultural perspectives into the collective discourse, or teachers represented their own

worldviews or the knowledge of institutional culture, their "sense of school," to students or families. Throughout, we observed the texture of human relations. The "we" here means the research team, but each of us perceived the world differently. We variously asked: Whose values were accorded respect? Whose values went unrecognized or were unconsciously ignored? Which students and families were included and participated? Which students and families were excluded or denied full participation? We attempted to understand underlying factors that shaped what we perceived as matches and mismatches among teachers, students, and their families. For this NCREST series on Cultural Interchange, we have produced four strikingly different case studies, each in a singular voice, each of which stands alone.

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# Dedication

I dedicate this study to the memory of Joel Hillman,
who gave his best to educate the children of the Bronx.

D.B.

# Acknowledgments

Many people helped me with this project, all of whom I would like to thank publicly.

My colleagues at the Department of Labor Studies and Employment Relations and the Department of Human Resource Management at Rutgers University encouraged me and provided information and thoughtful suggestions. I would like to acknowledge the help of Joseph Blasi, John Burton, D. Sue Cobble, Steve Director, Adrienne Eaton, Charles Heckscher, Jeff Keefe, Marlene Kim, Doug Kruse, Barbara Lee, Saul Rubinstein, Lisa Schur, Susan Schurman, Ryan Smith, Paula Voos, and Kirsten Wever. Nicole Braun, my research assistant, contributed greatly with her insights and sensitivity. The staff, including Ellie Babich, Betty Lou Heffernan, Estelle Kramer, Amalia Marchitto, Carolyn Montanez, and Gail O'Brien, assisted in countless ways. Suzette Hanser of NCREST did a great job keeping the paperwork flowing through the system.

Carmen and Joel Hillman made this study possible. Although I know they would not agree with all I have written, I hope this study contributes to the educational projects so important to them.

I would like to thank my program monitor at the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Sandra Steed, and her colleague, Beth Fine, for their invaluable support.

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My wife, Josephine Iraldo, provided crucial help and pointed criticism throughout the project. I have learned a great deal about the Bronx public schools and how they work, and sometimes don't work, from ongoing discussions with her about her experiences as a school social worker. My younger son, Joseph, was a central actor in this research project. He visited Mrs. Lynns' classroom, formed relationships with several students, lent his books to the classroom library, and kept me going when the project threatened to exhaust me. My older son, José, also contributed generously to the project; his experiences as a Bronx school teacher helped me put my observations in perspective. As always, my mother, Marilyn, and sisters, Rhea and Miriam, were a source of support, ideas, and encouragement.

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The members of the NCREST research team collaborated with me on what turned out to be a wonderful adventure. I have grown to increasingly appreciate their very different strengths and resources. Without Kathe, Jianzhong, and Kemly, I would not have been able to get this project underway. With their help, I have learned more than I ever imagined I would.

David Bensman

June 23, 1999

# Introduction

I came to this ethnography with a question generated by my previous research at Central Park East—how can schools bridge the cultural differences between students' families and the school? In 1991, when I interviewed graduates of Central Park East, a now-famous school in East Harlem founded by Deborah Meier, most told me that this was not an issue, but a few argued persuasively that Central Park East had not fully addressed the gaps between their neighborhoods and the culture of the school. Furthermore, they told me, they had paid a price later on for this omission when their lack of a sense of cultural identity made it difficult for them to negotiate high schools and colleges, which labeled them "minority."[1]

Although I was not sure how much these graduates' memories of elementary school had been reconfigured by their later experiences, what they said spurred me to think about how little educational theory, with its psychological moorings, takes into account the cultural relationships between home and school.[2]

With the help of a colleague, Kathe Jervis, who was in the midst of studying the silenced dialog of race at a public middle school in Manhattan, I began to explore ways to obtain research support.[3] By recruiting Kemly McGregor and Jianzhong Xu, two NCREST researchers, we assembled a culturally diverse research team, hoping that we would be able to learn from our differences and overcome the narrowness of our own perspectives as we observed and analyzed our data. Our first task was to draft a proposal to study what we called cultural interchange. Our proposal to con-

[1]See David Bensman (1995), *Lives of the Graduates of Central Park East Elementary School: Where They Have Gone? What Did They Really Learn?* New York: NCREST.

[2]Several studies helped bring this issue into focus. The following works were especially helpful: Michelle Fine's *Framing Drop Outs* (1991); Michele Foster's *Black Teachers on Teaching* (1997); Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* (1983); Herbert Kohl's *I Won't Learn From You!: The Role of Assent in Learning* (1991); Gloria Ladson-Billings' *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children* (1994); and Mary Poplin and Joseph Weeres's *Voices From the Inside: A Report on Schooling from Inside the Classroom* (1993).

[3]See Kathe Jervis (1996), "Why Are There No Brothers on This List?: Hearing the Hard Questions *All* Children Ask," *Harvard Educational Review* (66), 546–576.

duct ethnographic research at four public schools in New York City was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

I decided to do my fieldwork at a "typical" urban school rather than one imbued with learner-centered pedagogy for two reasons.[4] First, since virtually all of my education research had been about Central Park East, I thought it was time to move out of the rarefied atmosphere of the progressive network and look closely at mainstream public education. Second, I wanted to explore cultural interchange in a setting that did not make crossing the boundaries between home and school central to its mission and would enable our research team to compare what was happening at my site with the sites of the other three researchers, which I presumed were more committed to promoting border crossing.

I chose to study CES 518 of the New York City Board of Education, a school located in the Morrisania section of the southwest Bronx, within District 9 and in the poorest Congressional district in the United States.[5] Its student body is more than 60 percent Hispanic and 30 percent African American. Sixteen percent of third graders are reading at or above grade level. I chose this school as my research site because I had heard it was a good school and because I had access to it through my brother-in-law, Allen, who worked in District 9's central office, and my sister-in-law, Loretta, who was an assistant principal at the school. For years they had been telling me about their experiences trying to improve teaching and learning at what was once portrayed as one of the worst elementary schools in New York City.[6]

This seemed like a good time to see what was happening with my own eyes. With Allen and Loretta's assistance, I secured the cooperation of CES 518's principal in the spring of 1996, and as the fall approached, I eagerly prepared to begin my fieldwork. My plan was to spend two or three days a week in the Bronx while teaching my normal schedule of two courses each semester at Rutgers University, where I am Associate Professor in the School of Management and Labor Relations.

[4]Later, I discovered that CES 518 was undertaking efforts to become learner-centered, as are many other New York City schools. These efforts are made especially difficult because the school is so large; it has 1,600 students in two sites, the main building on the south side of the street and the annex on the north side. In an effort to make the school more manageable and to foster a sense of community, the principal has divided the school into four mini-schools, each with its own director, an assistant principal. I now wonder whether I can ever find a "typical" urban school, since each is unique.

[5]The name of the school, its administrators, teachers, and students have been given pseudonyms.

[6]This was a school whose principal was arrested for possession of crack cocaine in 1985. Since newspaper coverage of public education is sometimes inaccurate, I cannot say for sure that the school was as bad as it was portrayed.

## Changing My Research Plans

When I finally entered CES 518 in the South Bronx in late October 1996,[7] I expected to spend most of my time observing the interaction of a fifth grade teacher and her students while simultaneously typing my notes into a laptop computer. If you had pressed me, I might have told you that if the classroom teacher approved, I expected every so often to help a child with his or her schoolwork. Indeed, when I met with Mrs. Lynns to discuss how we would work together, I offered to help in this manner.

To my surprise, Mrs. Lynns, a tall, slim, always elegantly dressed African-American woman, with a Masters degree in Counseling Psychology and ten years' experience teaching at CES 518, told me that she welcomed any help I could give, without restriction or reservation. At the same time, she made it clear that she did not share my belief that cultural interchange was necessary for effective learning. Later she would tell me, "Once I meet a child, my interest is, 'you're here to learn. Whatever I give you, that's what I want you to do. I want you to learn.' But anything other than that—I respect their culture, but I don't make it a big issue."[8]

Since Mrs. Lynns' approach to teaching was quite different from mine, I wondered whether she really wanted me to help out in any way that was comfortable for me. I did have some doubts, assuming that Mrs. Lynns was like most teachers and really would not want to share control of her classroom. Furthermore, I wasn't sure that I could help her teach and still do my job as an ethnographer. At this point, I expected to spend most of my time in the classroom sitting, watching, and typing.

Also, I worried that my stance as an observer would make Mrs. Lynns and the children uncomfortable, causing them to shield their true feelings, censor their tongues, and constrict their behavior. But Mrs. Lynns was ahead of me. She didn't want me to be focusing my critical attention on her, and her suggestion that I teach along with her was a perfect solution. Once I was immersed in the struggle to help the children learn, it was hard not to be sympathetic to Mrs. Lynns.

When Mrs. Lynns introduced me to her children the first day, I made a spontaneous decision to present myself to the class as a whole person—a social, emotional, moral, and psychological being rather than simply as a university professor primarily interested in academic concerns.[9] Pulling out my wallet, I took out

[7] I did not enter the classroom until October because my brother-in-law, Allen, died in early September.

[8] From an interview with Mrs. Lynns conducted in February 1998 by the four members of the research team.

a picture of my son and gave it to the children to pass around. I told them that I was a father, that my son was almost their age, and that one day I would bring him to class and they could meet him. After I explained my project for a few minutes (I don't think any of the children had any idea what I was looking for), I sat down at a desk in the back of the room near an electric outlet, plugged in my computer, and began typing. The children accepted my presence as a sort of hybrid—more friendly than a teacher, too remote for a friend. They called me "Mr. David."

## Using a Computer—Inside and Outside the Classroom

Quickly it became apparent that my typing into the computer at the back of the room could not be ignored. It was not that it was noisy, but the children kept taking their eyes off Mrs. Lynns, who was usually the center of attention, to watch me. Whenever the children could find an excuse to get up from their desk to talk to me—one of the class "rules and regulations" was that students had to raise their hands to ask permission to speak or to leave their seats—child after child came up to me to look at what I was doing, to read what I wrote on the screen, and above all, to ask me how I could type without looking at the keys. Soon I was telling the children about how I had learned to type in high school, how I used my computer to write books and articles, and how my son used the programs and games I had loaded on the computer's hard drive. Children asked me to let them type on the keyboard so they could see their writing on the screen; they asked to read what I was typing about them; and they asked me to give them the computer so that they could play *Treehouse, Chess, Mickey's Memory Challenge, and Reader Rabbit 3.*

There was a computer in the classroom, but it was never plugged in. When I asked about it, I learned that only third graders at CES 518 were being taught how to use computers. The machine in Mrs. Lynns' room was just being stored there, and eventually it was moved elsewhere.[10] Since the children had no access to a computer in school, and I did, I decided to let them use mine when Mrs. Lynns was not teaching a lesson. Soon, children were begging me to let them take the computer to the cafeteria so they could play with it at lunch, and requests to use it in the classroom were so overwhelming that figuring out whose turn it was to use it was the biggest headache of my day. Complaints that someone was being a "hog" became a predominant classroom theme. Mrs. Lynns soon realized that I, a novice in the ele-

[9]This formulation of a whole human being is drawn from James Comer's *School Power*, 1993, p. 16.

[10]The year I was in Mrs. Lynns' classroom, CES 518 had computers in all of the third grade classrooms. The following year, all third and fourth grade classrooms had computers. In the school year 1998-99, all classrooms in the upper elementary grades had three computers. Capital Re, the school's corporate sponsor, provided some of the funds to purchase these computers.

mentary school classroom, was letting the students' desire to play with the new toy overwhelm me and disrupt the class, so she suggested that I post a sign-up sheet on the blackboard in the front of the classroom. Before long, everyone's name was on the list, and the commotion subsided.

Still, I had to decide whether I should allow children to take the computer to lunch with them since I didn't need it at that time. Because I spent lunch time eating and conversing with Mrs. Lynns and several of her colleagues in a cafeteria in the nursing home down the block, I couldn't take notes there. In a way, letting children use my computer during lunchtime was less disruptive of my note-taking than letting them use it at any other time. However, was it safe to let it out of my sight? Could I trust the children not to steal it, or to let it get stolen? Could I assume they were responsible enough not to let it out of their sight, or responsible enough to make sure it didn't fall and break?

I decided to try trusting the children. Children bringing the computer to lunch became routine, and for the lucky child who got to use the computer for an entire half hour, it was a real prize. Needless to say, the computer was never damaged or left behind. (Eventually I broke it myself but replaced it with an older machine that had no games.)

One day at the beginning of November, Nicole, a student in the classroom, approached me at my table in the back of the room and asked in a barely audible voice if she could try typing on my computer while the class did its silent reading. I had to decide: Should I interrupt my note-taking about which child was reading what? Would Mrs. Lynns approve? I followed my instincts, responding as I would to my son: it was okay with me, if Mrs. Lynns approved. (I always reminded the children that their teacher was in charge.) When Mrs. Lynns gave Nicole permission—after checking that it was okay with me—Nicole began writing in her file every day. Soon, she was using it as a diary.

## The Ethnographic Present

Then disaster struck. One day, Jessica, one of Nicole's teammates on the cheerleading team, opened Nicole's file and read what Nicole had written about her in anger. (The problem was with a boy Nicole liked but who preferred Jessica). Nicole was devastated.

Believing that daily writing in the computer had become important to Nicole, I bought Nicole a little diary with a lock at the local stationery store. Once Nicole had her diary, all the children wanted one of their own. First, the bolder children asked me; Lisette may have been first, but soon all the children made it clear that they desperately wanted a diary.

Now, I had to find an inexpensive way to meet the demand. I solved the problem by visiting a local discount store and buying, on sale, blank, plastic-covered note pads. (The covers had various paintings printed on them. I gave diaries covered with naked angels to the children I believed to be devoutly religious. To my surprise, Nicole thought the picture was "nasty" and asked for a different one.) Soon, just about everyone was keeping a personal journal.

CHAPTER

# 1

# Meeting Sister Sara and Finding Nicole

After Nicole lost her diary, she shared one with Lisette and two other girls. The girls allowed each other to read what each wrote in the diary, which is how Lisette learned that Nicole was thinking about killing herself; how Lisette came to me about it; how I passed this information on to Mrs. Lynns and the guidance office; and how Nicole, and later Justine, received counseling from a woman who was paid by the school from funds received from a grant to prevent drug use.

By the time Lisette told me about what Nicole had written, I already had learned a great deal about Nicole's life, so her despair did not come as a tremendous surprise. My knowledge inevitably did not arise from my observation in the classroom; indeed, had I remained in the background, the school and I would never have learned what Nicole was going through. One day in November, as the class began to line up to begin the slow, tense journey down two steep and narrow flights of stairs to the lunchroom, I noticed that Nicole was looking especially miserable. Nicole is the kind of girl whose smile can light up an entire room, but when her lips droop down in a frown instead of swooping up in a smile, she looks like she's carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders and she's going to drop it any minute. I tapped Nicole on the shoulder and asked her to step to the back of the girl's line so I could talk with her. (Boys and girls lined up separately to minimize distraction during the long wait preceding trips on the staircase. Boys who misbehaved had to stand at the back of the girls' line, and vice versa).

When I asked Nicole if something was bothering her, she shook her head. I didn't believe her, so I asked Mrs. Lynns if she and I could take Nicole out to lunch with us, explaining that Nicole looked upset and probably would welcome our attention. Mrs. Lynns told me that was fine, and said that the previous year she had often taken children with her to lunch. Since Mrs. Lynns approved, I invited Nicole to come with us. She accepted, went upstairs to get her coat, and we walked down the hill to a nursing-home cafeteria.

## Doing Lunch

Nicole and I waited in line to be served while Mrs. Lynns was washing her hands in the ladies' room. I told Nicole to order whatever she wanted—salad, cake, Jell-O, or fruit, and one of the hot meals—either roasted chicken with rice and beans or spaghetti with green beans on the side. Nicole looked at the choices arrayed before us on the glass shelves and said to me, "You're being nice to me?"

After Nicole made her selections, we went to the cash register. The cashier looked at the plastic dishes piled high on Nicole's tray and told me that Nicole's meal would be $2.00, while my more modest repast was $3.50. Mrs. Lynns whispered to me that the cashier always gave the children a break, and I thanked her. Nicole immediately began testing the limits of my generosity—when I pointed to the milk, soft drink dispenser, and water cooler asking her what she wanted to drink, Nicole pointed to a soda machine on the other side of the room. Digging in my pockets, I gave her the last of my change, three quarters, to put in the soda machine. That didn't suffice. On her first attempt, as her quarters disappeared down the slot of a machine that wasn't plugged in, no soda came out. Not wanting her to feel defeated, and knowing that the Federal grant would reimburse me, I gave her a dollar bill; this time, she succeeded in getting a Pepsi and change.

The Pepsi was, I think, Nicole's favorite part of the meal, but she dutifully ate as much as she could; between bites, she began to tell us about herself and her family. Nicole said that she lived with her grandmother and six brothers and sisters. She also had a godmother with whom she would spend her weekends; however, the previous summer her godmother moved to Connecticut and Nicole had not seen her since. The previous weekend her godmother was supposed to pick her up but was unable to come. (I surmise this is the reason Nicole had been looking so glum.) The details Nicole shared with us over lunch were the first bits of information that Mrs. Lynns and I knew about Nicole's family life. Mrs. Lynns had never met Nicole's grandmother in the two years Nicole had been in her class. No one had ever come to any of the parent-teacher conferences, and no one had ever signed Nicole's report cards (although guardians were required to do so).

Once we were back in the classroom, Nicole's meal with Mr. David and Mrs. Lynns became a "hot topic"; by the end of the day, I was committed to taking everyone to lunch. I started another sign-up list, but we had to follow the rules and regulations. Mrs. Lynns insisted that each child bring in a signed permission slip from a parent. In the case of Maria, a little girl whose mother spoke only Spanish, permission did not come for months, until Maria finally asked me to write the note and send it home for her mother to sign. Most children brought in notes right away, and lunchtime became an opportunity for Mrs. Lynns and me to spend private time with each child.

While I viewed lunch as a priceless opportunity to learn about the children's lives at home, they had other ideas. Spending their free lunch period answering questions from a strange, if sympathetic, adult wasn't their idea of relaxing. Soon, they began asking if their friends could accompany them to lunch. I agreed, as long as both were going out with me for the first time, because I had agreed to pay for only one lunch per child. Soon the children pushed further: "If their friends brought $2.00 with them, could they come, even if it were their second time?"

Before winter was over, Mrs. Lynns and I were taking groups of four or more students to lunch, not because this was the best way to obtain information, but because the children enjoyed going out with their friends. Some children came more than once a week, and after a while they didn't even bother to say a word to us, other than "hello, Mrs. Lynns" and "thank you, Mr. David." Lunch outside the school was becoming a class institution.

Once the children had gotten their "second inch," they asked for more. Most of them weren't very happy about the nursing home's hearty Spanish-style cuisine, although they were generally too polite to say so, and soon they began asking if they could go to nearby fast-food restaurants that served fried chicken and burgers. This was against school rules, of course, and parents certainly had not given permission for their children to walk about the neighborhood. By now, however, Mrs. Lynns could see how much fun the children were having when they went to lunch under Mr. David's supervision, so she agreed that we could go to local shops within two blocks of the school building.

I remember walking with a group of five or six children to "Munch Time," a shop located around the corner from the school, where the children clowned around and flirted while they waited for their bacon cheeseburgers and omelets. We were becoming a significant factor in the local economy as children convinced parents to send in lunch money despite the opportunity to receive free hot meals at school (the meals were described as "nasty").[11]

On the way back to school, Shakur, a tall, round boy with a high-pitched voice, sometimes tinged with rage (over the death of his mother?), shocked me when he turned to me and said that he had never before had so much fun at school. (Officers of the Parents' Association, whose headquarters were down the hall from Mrs. Lynns' class, were troubled, however. Did I have permission to take children off school grounds? Was I compromising their safety?)

On other occasions, I brought food back from local bodegas to the classroom where the children waited under Mrs. Lynns' supervision, or if Mrs. Lynns had gone to the cafeteria, they were under the supervision of my graduate assistant.

[11]All of the children at CES 518 received free lunches under a Federal subsidy program.

The children liked staying in the classroom during lunch break rather than leaving, because they could relax, gossip, go over homework, or listen to music.

## Building On Music—My Favorite Thing

Music is another story—I was learning about jazz and decided to share my new enthusiasm with the children, hoping that bringing Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington to the classroom might help them find a new way to connect to their American heritage and provide a point of pride for Nicole, Shakur, and the other African-American children in the class. At first, I brought my CD boom box to class every day, along with my laptop computer and video camera. (I must have looked a sight, walking from my car to the school loaded down with electronic gadgetry.) Soon, Mrs. Lynns gently suggested that I leave the boom box in her classroom, where she would store it in her cabinet overnight so the children could listen to music when I was at Rutgers University.

To my amazement, Miles Davis, Thelonius Monk, and John Coltrane became a part of the classroom. (Mrs. Lynns played music softly when children were reading, relaxing, or taking tests. Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" was most popular at test-taking time.) Children asked if they could take my tapes and CDs home, and soon I was a regular lending library, again with a sign-out sheet.

As I saw how enthusiastically the children were reacting to the music, I searched out Latin titles—Gloria Estefan and Selena singing in English were most in demand. (I'll never forget the look of delight on Maria's face when she heard Gloria Estefan singing "Quanto Te Quiero"; finally, Spanish culture is in the classroom!) Soon I began thinking of additional ways to build on the music. I brought in the documentary film "A Great Day in Harlem," a portrayal of Harlem's great jazz musicians coming together on a day during the 1950s to have their photograph taken. I thought seeing Dizzy Gillespie and Duke Ellington and Thelonius Monk moving on the screen alive and mischievous might help the children relate to the music. By February, they were writing about African-American musicians for their Black History Month projects. (One child discovered that an ancestor of Mrs. Lynns was a famous blues musician). In March, the children researched the lives of women musicians for Women's History Month. Marian Anderson, Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald, Gloria Estefan, Dinah Washington, Celia Cruz, Billie Holiday, Josephine Baker, Aretha Franklin, and above all, Whitney Houston, become classroom heroines, and their biographies and pictures filled the hallway bulletin boards.

I could tell similar stories about how the video camera and the tape recorder become part of the classroom. It is enough to say, however, that the children enjoyed exploring the possibilities of each piece of equipment, recording their own and their friends' voices, playing back observations and curses, and documenting

performances and special events. Important collective moments included watching the video of one class member playing center for the boys' basketball team in a victory over rival CES 42; the chorus perform at the headquarters of the school's corporate sponsor, Capital Re; the cheerleaders perform, especially when Lisette's underpants somehow are exposed for half a second; or, above all, watching the lancers duel at the class trip to Medieval Times. These were significant events that marked the growth of a consciousness that the classroom had its own culture and history, that it was a community whose members shared pride in their accomplishments, the memory of triumphant and painful experiences, and their own unique collective identity. (Lisette made me promise not to replay her embarrassing segment, however.)

My contributions to the curriculum had profound and complex effects on my work as an ethnographer. My vision of taking notes on my computer did not survive the children's requests to use the computer for their own purposes. Eventually I brought a tape recorder with me, dictating my memory of classroom interactions into the tape recorder while driving home from school. My videotapes became less useful as documents of school practice after children began playing games with the camera, filling the expensive high-eight tape with long stretches of unwatchable confusion.

## Expanding My Boundaries as Ethnographer and Teacher

Stepping out of an observers' role allowed me to know the children in ways I could never have planned. From my field notes:

> December 11, at lunch, Nicole tells me about her past weekend. Her uncle, who had promised to take her out for her birthday in October and failed to do so, took her and her cousin to see Space Jam. They also ate at Roy Rogers, and visited the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center. Then Nicole brings up something that's bothering her; she doesn't like to sit at a side desk, separate from all the other children. (Twenty students sit at four clusters of desks in the center of the room; two clusters of six desks and two clusters of four. Around the periphery of the room, ten children sit at individual desks.) Seating assignments are used as rewards and punishments. Children who misbehave are relegated to the periphery; cooperative children are allowed to sit with their friends. Mrs. Lynns later explained: "I would give them alternatives. Would you prefer to sit with the group or sit on the outside? That's your choice.[12]

[12]Interview with Mrs. Lynns, February 1998.

When I mention to Mrs. Lynns about Nicole's wish to move, she agrees that Nicole deserves a chance because she's been doing well. Nicole is delighted to move to an inside desk, and stays there for the remainder of the year. (The boy who's moved out to the periphery is not happy.)

On Friday, March 7, Nicole begins to cry in class. I suggest we go to the Parents' Association room, but once we are there, Nicole will not tell me what is bothering her. The following Monday, March 10, she explains she had been crying because her mother is sick with a kidney infection and her grandmother is also sick. She's moved in temporarily with an aunt who has three children of her own; now there are five children in the apartment. Nicole also tells me for the first time that her mother has a drug problem. A week later, Nicole starts crying near the end of the day. I bring her to the assistant principal's office. Nicole tells us that her aunt has confided to her that her grandmother has cancer. The assistant principal asks a counselor, Mrs. Black, to meet with Nicole. Mrs. Black tells Nicole how she lost her mother to cancer, and I tell her that my father suffered from cancer for sixteen years. Mrs. Black invites Nicole to come to her for counseling, and offers to help her find counseling outside of school. She also encourages Nicole to bring her aunt to school.

On the worst day of school, March 20, when Mrs. Lynns is absent and an unfamiliar substitute tries and fails to keep things under control, Nicole becomes so upset she begins writing "I hate myself" all over the blackboard. Miriam (another student) tries to erase the words, but Nicole keeps writing them over and over. When I rush her out of the classroom to take her downstairs to see Mrs. Black, there is no one in the office. Believing that Nicole needs help immediately, I head back upstairs to the assistant principal's office, but she's in the midst of an important meeting. Finally, overwhelmed by Nicole's distress and all the tension I've absorbed in the "Mrs. Lynns-less" classroom, I take Nicole and Clarissa, who is trailing us, out to lunch with a neighborhood mother (Virginia Patou) as chaperone. Over ham and cheese hero sandwiches and pastry and chocolate, Clarissa chats continuously for an hour until a calmer Nicole finally asks her, "Don't you ever stop talking?" (Needless to say, I get a stern talking to from the assistant principal for taking the girls out of the school.)

In early April, Nicole tells me that her grandmother has been released from the hospital and has received an Appreciation Day at the local church. "They rolled out a red carpet, gave her plaques, and said nice things about her."

On a school half day following a morning of test-taking, April 22, I take several children out to lunch at a local Dominican restaurant. On the way, some of the children call their parents on my mobile phone to get permission to come along. After we eat chicharones, fritos, and salad, I notice Nicole shaking. When I ask her why, she tells me that her grandmother is going to be mad at her for coming home late. She also tells me that her grandmother could use the stipend I'm paying families for participating in my study. She asks me if I'd like to meet her grandmother. I suggest that I write a note home saying how much I like Nicole, how she is late because the restaurant took a long time getting us the meal, and how I would enjoy meeting her.

I visit Nicole and her grandmother on April 24, taking along my nine-year-old son, who is on vacation. To my amazement, I learn that Nicole's grandmother is Sister Sara, the founder and supervisor of a Rescue Mission that houses sixty-five otherwise homeless people. Sister Sara welcomes me, tells me about her problems with diabetes that have kept her from visiting the school, and recounts the history of her Mission. By now, I learn, Sister Sara holds the deed to the two-family house where the Mission is located and raises the money, food, and clothing necessary from a wide variety of non-governmental sources. The Appreciation Day given her by a neighboring church featured a dozen community leaders, including the local Assemblywoman.

Sister Sara is well-known, a busy manager; God has given her the mission of caring for homeless people and, with some reluctance, she's taken in her grandchildren to prevent them from being separated from each other while in foster care. When I ask who supervises Nicole's homework, she tells me that Nicole manages on her own—but that Xenia, one of Nicole's older sisters, is running wild, and Sister Sara feels powerless against the Devil in her.

I want Nicole to share her pride in Sister Sara with her classmates, and even imagine bringing Sister Sara to class with me to tell the children about her work and to enlist them in helping the Mission, but Nicole won't have any part in it. Although she does not mind my telling an appreciative Mrs. Lynns about what I have learned, she doesn't want me to tell her fellow students. I don't understand this reluctance, but I obey her wishes. (Mrs. Lynns is so impressed by what she hears about Sister Sara that she tells Mr. Johnson, a clergyman and fellow teacher. He says that he knows of her and that his church has donated food and money to her Mission, but he does not know that Sister Sara is Nicole's grandmother.)

For the remainder of the year, I drive Nicole home from school whenever she asks. Sister Sara introduces me to her assistants, shows me the program for her Appreciation Day, and gives me clippings of the newspaper coverage. After we talk the second time, she accepts my offer to drive her to school to meet Mrs. Lynns.

By the end of April, my son comes with me to visit Nicole on a Saturday. I accompany them to a movie theater where they watch Anaconda and eat lots of popcorn and candy. At the Mission, my son plays Nintendo games on his Game Boy with one of Nicole's brothers. Over time, I get to know shy, withdrawn Nicole.[13]

My developing relationship with Nicole and her grandmother forces me to redefine the boundaries of my role as ethnographer and assistant teacher. My own interaction with Nicole, my behavior, her reactions, my feelings, her ups and downs, our pulls and pushes became part of the story and part of my experience helping Mrs. Lynns in the classroom. This past Christmas, six months after my observation period has ended, I call Nicole to arrange to give her a Christmas present and learn from a distressed Sister Sara that Nicole and two of her siblings have been taken to foster care by the police, who are acting for the Bureau of Child Welfare. It is difficult to enjoy my family's perfect Christmas after that, even though all three of my grandchildren are visiting.

Expanding the boundaries of my roles as both ethnographer and teacher enables me to get to know Nicole far better than I otherwise would have. At the beginning of the year, Nicole came to school armed with a resolve to keep her home life secret. No one at school knows about the role that religion plays in Nicole's life, or about Sister Sara and the Rescue Mission. Mrs. Lynns, who had Nicole's oldest sister, Monifa, in class several years earlier, did not realize that the two girls were related until February of the second year that Nicole was in her class. Mrs. Andrews, who had Monifa in her fifth grade class, where she was a "holy terror," knew nothing of the girls' background. Loretta Howton, the Assistant Principal, who had known Nicole and her sisters for several years and had met Nicole's grandmother when she drove Nicole home on a day when the snow was too deep for walking, knows nothing about the Rescue Mission. If Nicole had not gone out to lunch with Mrs. Lynns and me, and if she had not had the computer and a diary in which to write her secrets, no one would have known that part of Nicole that she was so intent on hiding.

[13]Eventually, I chose Nicole and Sister Sara to be one of my study families. Since I had already chosen the three families my grant proposal specified, I was only able to pay them half the amount of the regular stipend.

## Developing Personal Relationships With Children and Their Families— Does This Promote Classroom Learning?

Furthermore, and here I speculate—if Nicole had not been a member of the cheerleading squad, if she had not seen prize-winning performances of that squad played back in class on the VCR, if she had not shared in the music and taken CDs of Marian Anderson and Ella Fitzgerald home with her, would she ever have come in out of the margins, lowered the veil between school and home, and become a full (active, demanding, assertive) participant in Mrs. Lynns' fifth grade classroom?

This complex question is difficult to answer in the abstract, but my notes on daily classroom activities provide clues about how developing personal relationships affects learning:

> On November 6, Mrs. Lynns is teaching the students how to do long division. After explaining the procedure step-by-step, she calls children to come up to the blackboard and has them explain their answers. After forty-five minutes, she asks which children don't understand how to follow the steps—estimate, multiply, subtract, estimate, multiply, and subtract. Justine, Nicole, Annette, Fatai, Peter, Charisse, Hector, Richard, and Anthony all raise their hands. While Mrs. Lynns works with some of the children, I work individually, first with Clarissa, then with Richard, Nicole, Robert, and Shakur. I end up teaching more than observing. After lunch, Mrs. Lynns jokes with me that if I and a few of my students come in and work with her students on math all year, the district will "put us in charge" of math instruction. (Class size is a central issue. There were thirty-one children in Mrs. Lynns' classroom, about twice what research indicates is ideal. When Mrs. Lynns and I each taught math to half the class, each of us found our task considerably more manageable.)[14]
>
> On November 13, about two weeks after my first visit to the classroom, I compliment Nicole because Mrs. Lynns has posted her test paper on the rear bulletin board. Nicole is not easy to please, however. She complains that all the other tests on display have grades of 100 percent, while her paper, which has a grade of 100 percent on the other side, is up for all the world to see with four mistakes on it. But when I ask Nicole to come with me to Mrs. Lynns' desk to explain the problem, she refuses. So I ask Mrs. Lynns to call Nicole

[14]Elizabeth Word et al (1990). *Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) Tennessee's K–3 Class Size Study.* Final Summary Report, 1985–1990. ERIC Abstract ED320692.

over to her desk. When Nicole explains what's bothering her, Mrs. Lynns tells her that she put up Nicole's paper because it bears the highest grade anyone got on that part of the test! Nicole smiles.

On November 20, when Nicole walks up to me to show me her work, I tell her it is correct and I think she is a smart girl. "No," she replies, "I got a 23 on my science test." Later in the day, I notice that Nicole isn't copying the spelling words. I ask her why. "I can't see them," she replies. "Why don't you move up close to the board and copy the assignment down?" I suggest. She moves up to the board and starts copying the assignment. (Later in the year, she begins wearing eyeglasses.)

A few days later, Monday, December 2, is the first day Mrs. Lynns and I ask Nicole to come to lunch. The first thing I ask her is if she knew the answer to a question about pronouns that Mrs. Lynns asked earlier. She says that she did. "Why didn't you raise your hand when you knew the answer?" I ask. "I didn't want to make a mistake," Nicole answers. Mrs. Lynns comments, "Aha, lack of confidence. From now on, please give the answer if you know it. And if you don't know it, tell me."

After lunch, Mrs. Lynns and I talk about Nicole, and review the information contained in her school records. Noting that Nicole's reading scores improved from 32 percent to 48 percent last year, Mrs. Lynns tells me that Nicole "could be a very bright student if she had support at home."

Four days later, Nicole shows me an essay she's written. It's about her plans to travel to Connecticut to visit her "guardmother" [godmother] on the day before Christmas. I tell her to show her essay to Mrs. Lynns, who praises it and says that Nicole's will be the first paper to go up on the board because it's the first writing assignment Nicole has finished.

At DEAR time (Drop Everything and Read), I notice that Nicole has no book. I tell her to select a book from the meager classroom library (CES 518 eventually used $1,000 from the federal grant to buy new books for Mrs. Lynns' classroom), but she says she can't find one she wants to read. I show her a Nancy Drew story I'd brought in from my older son's childhood collection and ask her if she wants to read it. She says yes; then she asks why the girl on the cover is not helping the other girl who is drowning. I tell her it's a mystery, and she'll have to read it to get the answer. Later, in March, she selects her second book, *The Incredible Journey.*

## Accommodating Student Differences

When I look over my notes now, I see that during the course of the year, Mrs. Lynns and I not only came to know Nicole as a whole person, but we came to see her as an individual student and learner with her own interests and learning style. Based on this knowledge, we were able to provide her with one-on-one instruction, encouragement, and advice.[15]

Our support enabled Nicole to bring herself into the classroom and its curriculum, making her worlds of home and school no longer so separate. Writing first in the computer and later in the diary, Nicole brought her home concerns into the classroom. She wrote her first composition—about a proposed visit to her godmother—only after we had taken her out to lunch where she told us about her family.

Participation in cheerleading was another school experience that facilitated Nicole's learning. The cheerleading team of twenty girls practiced twice weekly after school and every Saturday morning, learning and perfecting cheers and dances to perform at school events and public competitions.

When Nicole first informed me that she was a cheerleader, I was surprised. It seemed the kind of activity that outgoing, popular girls like Jessica and Lisette join, but Nicole? It soon became clear that being part of a small community of girls and women brought Nicole friendships and an important sense of belonging. She was forever practicing her moves.

By Christmas, the cheerleaders were performing at interschool basketball games, holiday shows, and local competitions. When I visited the Gaucho Gym in the far South Bronx one Saturday morning to see CES 518's cheerleaders compete, Squad B, which included Nicole, finished ahead of Jessica and Lisette in Squad A. (The silver medal trophy went into CES 518's display case in the hallway next to the principal's office.) The precision, discipline, enthusiasm, and showmanship that Nicole and her squad demonstrated were a world apart from the shyness and loneliness of the girl I'd approached before lunch just two months earlier.

## My Reflections

If this were a Hollywood script, the last scene would feature a triumphant Nicole. But reality is a bit different.

[15]In Lois Weiner's book (1993), *Preparing Teachers for Urban Schools: Lessons from Thirty Years of School Reform*, she says that urban schools are structured and governed in ways that makes such individualization all but impossible.

The more Nicole reveals about her life, the more intractable her problems seem. Her sister, Xenia, got so "wild" that Mrs. Black, CES 518's grant-funded drug prevention counselor, begins the process of placing Xenia in a dropout prevention program, hoping that her removal from the Mission would not only "straighten her out" before it was too late, but also make the lives of Nicole and her grandmother easier. Xenia, however, proves not to be the only source of stress; the girls' mother begins frequenting the Mission to steal whatever she can sell and to scream epithets at her daughters.

Not surprisingly, there are times when Nicole comes to class so miserable that she can't work. She is removed from the cheerleading squad for not following rules. Mrs. Black, who considers Xenia a more pressing problem than Nicole, provides sporadic, if warm, support.

When Nicole graduates in June, she is still vulnerable, still at risk. This year, forced into foster care with an aunt and two siblings, she is in a strange new school in Brooklyn where she knows no one outside her new family.

The difficult challenges facing Nicole should not overshadow what she has accomplished in the past year. Despite the stress she experiences in her home, Nicole comes to school every day, does her homework conscientiously on her own, learns what the school asks her to learn, passes her standardized tests, reads at least two two-hundred page books on her own, learns about Black contributions to American musical history and culture, writes expressive compositions, and masters long division, decimals, and fractions.

She develops socially as well. By the end of the year, she has formed new friendships with a group of girls with whom she is less competitive than with Jessica, she has a male admirer who takes her to the prom, and she develops a more open and trusting relationship with Mrs. Lynns and me.

These accomplishments are just a sliver of the growth Mrs. Lynns' students experienced within the past year. The processes that help Nicole—getting to know and be known by her teachers, bringing her family to school and her school to her home, finding outlets in school for self-expression—these same processes enable some of Nicole's classmates to make remarkable progress. Luther, for example, who was depressed and listless at the beginning of the year, won art competitions and a scholarship for private art lessons (see Chapter Three). For other students, however, barriers at home and at school interfere with cultural interchange and impede academic progress. The story of Clarissa best illustrates the pitfalls that can befall efforts to support student learning.

CHAPTER

# 2

# Evaluating Clarissa

## Clarissa in Class

Clarissa Ruiz is such a quiet student that I do not notice her during my first two weeks in Mrs. Lynns' classroom. While other children call attention to themselves by waving their hands wildly in the air volunteering to give an answer (Peter), shouting out when not called upon (Carlos), or confidently explaining answers no one else has figured out (Jessica), Clarissa tries to make herself invisible. But one day, during my third week in school, Mrs. Lynns calls on Clarissa to help solve a division problem. From my notes:

> November 6: Mrs. Lynns is teaching the children how to divide a two digit divisor into a three digit dividend (i.e., 75 into 413). Jessica suggests that the answer is 5 with a remainder. When Mrs. Lynns asks how she arrived at that answer, Jessica says she tried 1 and found that was not enough, so she tried 2; when she tried 5, that was enough. "That's okay if it works for you," Mrs. Lynns responds, "but let me tell you another way." Mrs. Lynns then shows them how to estimate, using place holders. "How do we check that "5" is correct?" she asks? "Leomar, what would you do?" "Multiply," Leomar answers. "Very good," Mrs. Lynns responds.
>
> Mrs. Lynns turns to the rest of the class. "How many of you don't understand how to solve this problem?" she asks. Seven children raise their hands. "Be honest," Mrs. Lynns insists. A few more hands are raised. For the rest of the period, Mrs. Lynns and I circulate around the class, helping those children who don't understand how to do division. Clarissa is one of three children who ask me for help. Helping her takes so much energy, I forget to type my notes.

When I next come to class, November 8, I make sure to check in with Clarissa. I see the Thanksgiving story she has written at Mrs. Lynns' request; I am amazed at her spelling and grammar deficiencies and copy it verbatim:

> On Thanks given—they a long of family that get together and have a good time they eat turkey and potatoes salad and yellow mole and many other thing and family have funny get together they love be with each other family funny be to gether and all family like to be with each other and family happy Thanks give by Clarissa Ruiz.

Curious about why Clarissa makes so many basic mistakes, I watch her coloring the map of her house—Mrs. Lynns' latest assignment. Noticing my eyes on her, Clarissa beckons me with her tiny index finger and the sweetest little helpless smile. She tells me that she wants to do her map over again because she doesn't like hers. She asks me how to draw "something in the kitchen that you bake in." I tell her that I am the world's worst artist, but that Sean is drawing a really nice stove. "Do you want to look at it?" Clarissa walks over to Sean, says she likes the drawing he's done of an oven, and asks him to draw one in her map. Sean smiles and does so.

One week later, November 14, I meet Clarissa's mother at the first parent-teacher conference. From my notes:

> Mrs. Ruiz comes in shyly, wheeling a shopping cart, with Clarissa and Clarissa's sister by her side. I smell something on her breath; I guess it's wine.
>
> Mrs. Lynns starts out positive. "Clarissa is a well-respected child," she says, "but she's capable of doing better." Then Mrs. Lynns makes clear her first priority. "Clarissa often doesn't hand in her homework."
>
> Mrs. Ruiz appears very nervous, but she responds immediately to make clear that she agrees with the teacher about homework's importance: Clarissa's been doing her homework for two hours every night, she explains. Clarissa joins in, claiming that she does the homework but she doesn't always hand it in because her notebook is messy. "I lose the homework before I turn it in," she explains. "I told you to organize your notebook so you won't lose things," Mrs. Lynns responds. "She has dividers," Mrs. Ruiz insists, trying to make sure that Mrs. Lynns knows that the family is supporting Clarissa's efforts. But Clarissa's explanation doesn't inspire confidence: she gets her homework lost, she says, "mixed up with her sister's." To this, there's not much Mrs. Lynns can say: "Be careful you don't lose it" is her last word on the subject.
>
> Mrs. Lynns then goes on to her second priority: "Clarissa needs to work on her script writing," she reports to Mrs. Ruiz. "This is the first time I had to write script," Clarissa explains. Mrs. Lynns tells Clarissa's mother that the children who were in her fourth grade

class last year had all learned to write script then. Clarissa is going to have to catch up. "It's very important that they learn to write properly. In junior high school, their work won't be accepted if they don't write script."

Next, Mrs. Lynns points to the area of the report card where teachers must mark if the child is in danger of being held back. "Clarissa is far below grade level on her reading. Her reading score last spring was four percent. Mrs. Howton (the assistant principal) is going to review her grades in December to see if she has worked hard enough to stay in fifth grade. She'll need to work harder if she is to graduate in the spring, she tells Mrs. Ruiz.

Mrs. Ruiz tells Mrs. Lynns that she has two children in addition to the two who have come with her to the conference. Nevertheless, she assures her that she will make sure that Clarissa shows her all her homework. Pleased by Mrs. Ruiz's expression of concern about her daughter's work, Mrs. Lynns offers another positive comment: she is proud of Clarissa for solving her two digit divisor problems. But Mrs. Lynns's last word contains a caution: Clarissa needs to improve her attendance. She's already missed class ten times.

The next time I'm in class, November 18, I begin to understand why Clarissa is having such a difficult time. The class is going over a vocabulary story. Mrs. Lynns had asked the children to write definitions of new words that appear in the story that the class is reading together. A number of children have not brought their definitions. Among them is Clarissa.

Mrs. Lynns asks each child for an explanation. As she's going around the room, Clarissa asks me for help getting a dictionary out of the closet. Whispering, I ask her why she hasn't done the work. She answers that she looked for definitions in the glossary in the back of her reader, but many of the words weren't there. She says that she doesn't have a dictionary at home.

Later, when I tell Mrs. Lynns about Clarissa not having a dictionary, Mrs. Lynns stops the class to make sure that everyone has a dictionary. But Hector, who lives in a nearby homeless shelter, raises his hand to say that he doesn't have one at home either. Mrs. Lynns tells Clarissa and Hector that from now on they will have to take a class dictionary home on weekends when they have vocabulary homework. I decide to buy them dictionaries.

As Clarissa proceeds to define her vocabulary words with the aid of one of the classroom dictionaries, I discover that there's a more fundamental problem standing in her way: Clarissa can't find the words in the dictionary because she can't read the cursive script that Mrs. Lynns has written on the blackboard. When she copies the

word "rains," she writes "marined" (at least, that's what Clarissa's writing looks like to me). I suggest to Mrs. Lynns that Clarissa move her seat up closer to the blackboard so she will be able to decipher Mrs. Lynns' (beautiful) handwriting better.

The next time I attend class, November 20, I find Clarissa sitting up closer to the blackboard, where she has a much easier time copying down her assignments. However, when I ask her if she's happy that she changed seats, she gives me a pained look. "What's the problem?" I ask, alarmed, fearing I'd inadvertently hurt Clarissa in my effort to help. Clarissa explains that she liked her old seat, next to Lisette, because Lisette used to help her with her work. In her new seat, she's afraid she'll be on her own.

Mrs. Lynns confides to me that Clarissa's fourth grade teacher told her that she was surprised that Clarissa had been promoted to fifth grade because she (the teacher) had strenuously recommended that Clarissa be kept back. Mrs. Lynns tells me that she's quite concerned that Clarissa won't be able to go on to sixth grade. Unwilling to see Clarissa fail, I point out that her handwriting has been improving. Then I ask a question that's been bothering me all week: "Was Clarissa's mother drunk when she came to the parent meeting on Thursday?" "Yes," Mrs. Lynns whispers, "she was, and she was incoherent. Clarissa and her sister have to take a lot of responsibility at home." A few days later, when Clarissa misses her third day of class that week, Mrs. Lynns suggests that Clarissa's absences have more to do with her mother than with Clarissa. Clarissa tries hard, Mrs. Lynns affirms.

That Clarissa tries hard becomes apparent the next day when Mrs. Lynns is teaching a lesson on pronouns. "Give me an example of a pronoun," Mrs. Lynns asks. Justine and José can't do it. Finally, Mariaelena and Jessica explain the definition of pronouns. Mrs. Lynns asks if everyone understands. Everyone says yes. But when Alicia is called on, she says nothing. Then Mrs. Lynns asks Clarissa, and Clarissa says she understands. Asked to give an example of a pronoun, Clarissa says, in a tiny, quiet voice, "You could use she for girl." Glad to hear Clarissa get an answer correct, I ask Clarissa to repeat it. She does, this time in a louder voice. Mrs. Lynns tells the class that Clarissa gave a good answer and repeats what Clarissa said previously. This is a small victory for Clarissa, but it's not easily won. She's still afraid to state her answers aloud.

Three days later, the positive trend continues. Mrs. Lynns tells me that she's proud of the way Clarissa has improved her handwriting.

On December 11, I bring in dictionaries for Hector and Clarissa. Hector thanks me profusely and shakes my hand. Clarissa doesn't thank me. Later, she asks me if I have given her the book to keep. I tell her yes, and then remind her to thank me. On the way to lunch, Clarissa is smiling. She shows me that the dictionary has sign language in it, which is good because her sister has a hearing problem. She shows me how to sign "I love you."

The following day, I talk to Loretta about my growing interest in and concern for Clarissa and her family. Loretta tells me that Clarissa's younger sister, Theresa, is partially deaf. The school-based team charged with evaluating whether children need special education services recommended last year that Theresa be sent to an MIS-3 class, which is smaller and allows for intensive remedial work, but Loretta advised Mrs. Ruiz not to allow her to be sent to special education class. "The girl is smart," Loretta says. "She needs services, not special education." With help from a hearing specialist twice a week, Theresa progressed and graduated from second grade. She's now in a different school that provides special support services for bright students with hearing difficulties.

The girls' mother is another story, Loretta tells me. She is an alcoholic who sometimes comes into school and argues loudly with Loretta. Last year, something went wrong at home and the family had no money for Christmas presents. Loretta bought a gift for Theresa and is still indignant. "Imagine," she fumes, "the mother is reeking with booze, and there's no money for Christmas presents."

After Loretta tells me these stories, I'm confused: I admire Loretta for intervening to help Theresa, but at the same time, I can't stand hearing such a negative picture. I tell her how sweet Clarissa is, how hard she is trying, and how far behind she's already fallen. Loretta tells me that Clarissa used to be a real problem because she talked all the time, especially at lunch. "Well, she's well-behaved now," I respond, defending Clarissa, but at the end, I throw in a comment to indicate that I share Loretta's outlook: "But she looks like she has to take care of herself."

By now, I have become quite concerned about Clarissa. She seems to be drowning and no one seems to be doing anything about it. When I make my first decision to ask a child if I can include her and her family in my study, I ask Miriam Milagros, not Clarissa. Why? Miriam Milagros seems more typical. I don't want to start with someone having unusual problems. Besides, Miriam has been friendly, and I've really enjoyed getting to know her.

However, a few days later when I ask Miriam if her family will participate, she gives me bad news: her mother says no. I panic; if Miriam, the friendliest child in the class, can't get her family to agree to be interviewed, will I be able to find anyone to let me into their home? I decide to ask Clarissa. I know she'll be happy if I ask her; besides, if her family is as desperate as they seem, will they really be able to turn down the $1,000 I can pay?"

When I ask Clarissa if her mother will participate in my study in return for $1,000, Clarissa answers, "Yes, definitely. My mother could use the money to buy furniture for my room because it's empty."

Once I decide to make Clarissa and her family subjects of my study, I begin to focus on Clarissa's academic experiences. On January 6, I follow Clarissa into her

reading class where Mr. Gilbert Reno, a novice from the Teach for America program, instructs fifteen children reading on a second grade level.

District 9's reading program for elementary school children, the "Streaming Program," was designed by Allen Howton, Loretta's husband. For one hour each day, the children leave their regular teacher and meet in groups selected on the basis of the children's standardized reading test scores. There, they work on the particular skills they need to master to progress to the next grade level.

For Clarissa, this means leaving Mrs. Lynns's class for the first period every day. Since she is the only student from Mrs. Lynns's class reading on the second grade level, she's the only student from that class to meet with Mr. Reno. Clarissa doesn't like being separated from the friends and classmates who are so central to her life. Mrs. Lynns doesn't like her students to leave her either; like many teachers, she feels that she knows her own students best and doesn't trust other teachers to give them adequate attention and follow through.

I've never seen the Streaming Program in action, so I'm curious to see what goes on:

> When I walk into the room, children are taking turns reading aloud the story "Chin Chiang and the Dragons' Dance," from the reader, a book named *Adventuring*. Every once in a while, Gil interrupts with a question. "What does 'muffled' mean?" he asks. "Fierce? Give me your fierce face." When Gil reads, he puts real expression into his voice, and the children follow the story. In order to provoke the students to think about what's going on in the story, he asks children to predict what is going to happen next.
>
> Clarissa is sitting at her desk, holding the book standing up in her lap. She's wearing a red sweatshirt, a hair clip, a bow in her hair, and a necklace. When she reads along, she moves her finger from word to word. She's attentive but doesn't volunteer. After I've been in the room five minutes, she gets distracted, starts playing with the ring on her finger, and starts to yawn. When Gil calls one of the boys to attention, Clarissa comes back to the story. Gil asks the children to finish reading the last page, giving them three minutes. Clarissa reads attentively, but other children begin either talking to each other or looking at me and my computer. Gil ends the class by reading aloud the page he's asked his students to read by themselves. "For homework guys, page 155, questions 1–4. Answers in complete sentences." It's then time for Clarissa to return to Mrs. Lynns's classroom.

After all the children return from their "Streaming" rooms, Mrs. Lynns begins by asking one of the students to collect the homework—a comic strip draw-

ing. Clarissa tells me she didn't do her assignment because she went to the hospital with her sister. Today's lesson is to determine whether a sentence is declarative, interrogatory, or exclamatory. Clarissa tells me that she knows what to do because there are examples on the previous page. But before long, she asks me for help on the sentence, "She predicted a rainstorm." I tell her that she should tell Mrs. Lynns when she doesn't understand something, then Mrs. Lynns will explain the problem for the whole class. Clarissa nods yes, she will. But she never does. Whispering, she asks me—or one of the other students—for help instead.

As the New Year begins, I begin my home visits. By now, Clarissa and I like and trust each other, and I'm anxious to find out what happens in Clarissa's home. Does her family sabotage her efforts to succeed in school, as it appears to Loretta, Mrs. Lynns, and me? Or is Clarissa's mother telling the truth when she says that she supports and monitors Clarissa?

## Visiting Clarissa and Her Family

To answer these questions about Clarissa and her family, I go home with Clarissa after the school day ends on January 6. We decide to walk so she can show me her daily path from school to home. Lisette and Sean accompany us, since they both live in the same direction.

The block where CES 518 stands is up on a hill, and the only way down this hill is an outdoor concrete stairway that I had not previously noticed. Clarissa tells me we have to walk down the staircase to get to her house. The staircase is steep, thirty steps down, and isolated. At each of the three landings, garbage lies in piles and litters the walkways—mostly crushed cardboard boxes, torn black garbage bags, beer cans, and soda bottles, but also broken shopping carts, hamburger wrappers, and assorted odds and ends. I ask the children if they mind walking up and down the dirty staircase, and Lisette tells me, "Yes," she does. "It's dirty and ugly," she says. I cannot believe how vulnerable the children are, walking so far away from the traffic on the streets above and below.

But in mid-afternoon, descending the staircase is not a problem. When we reach the street below, Lisette points to her building and says she has to go home where her older sister is awaiting her arrival. Sean walks another block with us and points out a tenement building with a door painted blue, and says that's where he lives. As Clarissa and I walk the remaining block to the housing project where she lives, Clarissa points out her building and tells me proudly she lives there with her father and mother, two sisters, and a brother. Her mother and father have always been together, she tells me proudly, and will always stay together. It's the first time I've learned that Clarissa's father lives with the family. Clarissa warns me not to tell anyone.

When we cross the avenue, Clarissa waves to her mother and brother, Richie, who are waiting for her at the front entrance of the building, a twenty-story apartment tower. In front of the building are benches, a wire fence, and lots of children playing hopscotch, hanging out, or running back and forth. Mrs. Ruiz greets me and tells me that she's waiting for Clarissa's younger sister, Theresa, to return from school on a bus. While we wait, Clarissa's older sister arrives and then Theresa. When we're all assembled, we ride upstairs in the metal clad elevator.

The Ruiz' apartment opens onto a cramped kitchen. Beyond the kitchen is a dining alcove with a glass-topped table. The living room is beyond. I see a Puerto Rican flag on one wall, a poster of Lower Manhattan with the Brooklyn Bridge on another. The television set is placed centrally in the living room and is turned on as soon as the family settles in. Clarissa's father arrives, shakes my hand, and introduces himself as José. Mrs. Ruiz asks if I'd like something to drink, and I ask for some fruit juice.

I've imagined doing home visits with children from CES 518 for months, but now that the moment has arrived, I'm not sure where to start. I improvise, asking Clarissa if she'd like me to help her with her homework, and her eyes light up. She opens up her math book, and we sit down at the dining room table to start doing arithmetic. I ask Clarissa to read me the first problem, and that's where the trouble begins.

When Clarissa comes to the word "presents," she can't read the word. I suggest we get the dictionary to look up how to pronounce it. Clarissa goes to the bedroom she shares with her sister and brings back the dictionary I bought her the previous month. She looks up the word "present"; we check the pronunciation guide at the bottom of the page, and she determines that the word is "presents." But a few words into the problem, there is the word "data," and Clarissa doesn't know how to read that word either. The word "spend" is central to the math problem Clarissa is supposed to be doing: "According to the bar graph, how many more students want to spend 3 months, rather than 6 months, in space?" Since Clarissa can't read the word "spend," she can't understand the problem, much less read the graph and find the answer. I show Clarissa how to sound out "sp" and "end." Is Clarissa's problem that she doesn't know phonics?

Finally, I decide to coach Clarissa each step of the way. I read her the problem, but to solve the problem, she needs to be able to multiply 4 and 1/2 times 6. She can't do that because she doesn't know the six times table. 4 x 6 = ? I tell her that if she can't do the multiplication, she better learn her times table, but in the meantime, she can get the answer by counting out four groups of six. Clarissa doesn't know how to do that either. I draw four and one half groups of six lines for her, and Clarissa counts them out. When she gets 27, I tell her to check it with the bar graph.

Clarissa then tries to compare the two numbers on the bar represented by the bar graph. She doesn't know how to do it. I have to give her another answer before she realizes she has to subtract. She now subtracts successfully. After she ascertains that the next problem requires her to do the same thing, she does the next problem successfully too. I am overwhelmed. How does anyone expect Clarissa to do her math homework when she can't read the problems?

After we've done the math homework, Mrs. Ruiz, Clarissa, and I talk. Clarissa begins by complaining that Mrs. Lynns gives too much homework. Mrs. Ruiz agrees, stating that Clarissa doesn't have time to read because she spends so much time doing her homework. Then she explains that she herself did learn to read in school. She came to the United States from Puerto Rico when she was three years old and attended school in the Bronx. She says she stopped going to school after going through ninth grade four times. The only thing she learned in school, she tells me, was how to read. Mrs. Ruiz tells me that she wants to help Clarissa with her homework, but can't do very much. She can't even read the homework assignments because Clarissa writes them in cursive script, which Mrs. Ruiz never learned how to read. Besides, she explains, Clarissa is taught differently from the way she was taught. She learned from a book that had answers in the back; to get the answers, she tells me with a smile, she cheated by looking up the answers in the back of the book.

Mrs. Ruiz tells me that she grew up in the same neighborhood where Clarissa is now going to school. One of her children chimes in that Mrs. Ruiz was left back so many times because her ninth grade teacher didn't like her. Mrs. Ruiz smiles to acknowledge this story, but it doesn't make much sense to me. Later, after we've gotten to know each other better, she tells me that she kept failing ninth grade because she used to stay home all the time. Her family didn't have much money and rather than wear the same clothes to school each day, Mrs. Ruiz would hide in the closet. She also tells me that Clarissa was a good student in first grade, but then started having problems. Clarissa chimes in that she began falling behind when she started hanging out with her older sister. Mrs. Ruiz agrees.

To break the ice further, I offer chocolates to Clarissa and her mother. (Miriam Milagros had given me the chocolates in school.) Later on, I offer a chocolate to José, but he turns it down. He's drinking something from a bottle in a brown paper bag. I assume he's drinking beer and that he doesn't think chocolate goes with beer. When Clarissa asks me for another chocolate, I tell Clarissa she'll have to ask her mother. Mrs. Ruiz says it's okay. I give the box of chocolates to her, and she gives a chocolate to Clarissa, her brother, and her younger sister.

Mrs. Ruiz tells me that she's concerned about getting her money from my research grant without having the sum deducted from her welfare check. I tell her I'll find out how it can be done.

As I talk about money with Mrs. Ruiz, I allow Clarissa, her brother Richie, and her sister Theresa to play games on my computer. At first, Richie plays *Treehouse* and his sisters join in. Then Clarissa asks for another game, the one she's been playing in school—*Reader Rabbit 2*. The three children learn how to play it. They figure out how to complete sentences by choosing the appropriate word. One of the children suggests that the family should get a computer—and not a baby computer.

At this point, it's 5:00 p.m. I've been in the apartment just one hour, but my computer's battery fails, so the children can't play on it anymore. I leave before I overstay my welcome. To get back to my car, I have to climb back up the outdoor staircase. It's dark and absolutely still; I shiver with fear, wondering why I ever put myself in such a position. I resolve that the next time I visit Clarissa's family after school, I'll drive the car so I won't have to walk back in the dark.

## Referring Clarissa Is Difficult

When I get back to school on January 8, I tell Mrs. Lynns how upset I am by Clarissa's inability to read the math problems. Mrs. Lynns is sympathetic. She tells me that she knows Mrs. Ruiz because Clarissa's sister Blanca was her student a few years earlier. Indeed, Clarissa was placed in her classroom this fall because Mrs. Lynns had worked successfully with the family when Blanca's hearing problems were diagnosed and rectified.

Mrs. Lynns says that Clarissa should have been given reading help in first or second grade, but at that time the then-Chancellor Fernandez was discouraging special education referrals, which may explain why Clarissa was not evaluated to determine if she needed modified instructional services. Now, Mrs. Lynns explains, Clarissa can't get extra help until she's evaluated. The first step is for Mrs. Lynns to request that Clarissa is tested by the school-based support team. Mrs. Lynns agrees to ask Shelly Howell, the Educational Evaluator, for the forms that she must fill out to begin the process. As far as I know, Mrs. Lynns does not do so.

Many weeks pass before Mrs. Ruiz and I request that Clarissa be evaluated. In the meantime, Clarissa struggles in school while I work to develop a trusting relationship with Clarissa's family. Getting Mrs. Ruiz's agreement to participate in my research project turns out not to be a problem. My wife, a school social worker who was born in Puerto Rico, speaks to her on the telephone and explains how the family can be paid for participating in the research without losing its family assistance payment. Mrs. Ruiz sends in her social security number immediately; when Clarissa delivers it to me, she warns me not to give the number to anyone.

Getting Clarissa help proves more difficult, however. On February 3, Mrs. Lynns tells me that Clarissa has not done well on her recent tests—she got a zero

on the spelling test and only 23 percent on vocabulary. Furthermore, Mrs. Lynns reports, she has spoken to Clarissa's third grade teacher, who told her that Clarissa was, at that time, below grade level in reading. Mrs. Lynns is troubled. "Why did they pass her on?" she asks me. "Now she's got big problems."

Even in the enrichment activities, which ought to be a source of enjoyment and a spur to self-esteem, Clarissa meets failure. For Black History Month, CES 518 has arranged with a group called Arts Connection to teach children an African dance. Mrs. Lynns' class has been selected to participate in the dance lesson, and in mid-January, a dance teacher and drummer begin working with Mrs. Lynns' students for one period three times a week. Clarissa volunteers enthusiastically, while many of the boys and a few of the more bashful girls hold back. Those not participating sit in the auditorium and watch—there is no activity planned for them, and for some, it is lost time. But Clarissa is up on stage, listening to the dance teacher, trying to catch the beat, dancing in a group with the best dancers, the most popular girls. In the second week of rehearsals, as performance day draws near, the dance instructor begins to press the children. "There's a lot to learn, and only one more rehearsal after today," she tells her troupe. The she calls out Clarissa's name, telling her to leave the stage because she doesn't know the dance steps well enough. When Justine and Alicia collide on stage because of Alicia's misstep, they are told to leave as well. Clarissa and Justine are devastated. I sit next to Clarissa to comfort her, putting my arm around her shoulder. Mrs. Lynns and I decide to invite the two crying girls to join us for lunch. Mrs. Lynns shares her meal with Justine, while I share mine with Clarissa.

After lunch, a small miracle occurs. After I play some music in the classroom for those children who are not rehearsing on stage, they decide to practice the dance on their own. Justine takes the lead, and all six children in the room participate. Justine shows everyone the dance steps, the most elaborate steps done by the "first" team of dancers. As Justine and Clarissa dance, they assign themselves the roles of the people on the first team. "I'll be Jessica," Justine calls out. "I'll be Lisette," responds Clarissa. The impromptu dancers have great fun until their classmates return.

Moments of freedom like this are rare, but in the next few weeks, in the interstices of the school day, Clarissa begins telling me stories about her life with her family. For someone who tried to make herself invisible, Clarissa's change towards me is startling. I am becoming a confidant.

On January 23, for example, Clarissa tells me that her older sister, Blanca, plays an instrument very well. Clarissa doesn't know the name of the instrument, but when I prompt her, she describes a clarinet. Then she tells me that her mother wants to take Blanca out of her junior high school because there are too many children there who are bad. One boy was thrown out of the window recently, Clarissa tells me excitedly, and there are children who are "perverts." They touch girls'

breasts. No one has done that to Blanca, Clarissa says proudly, because if they tried, "Blanca would shove her fist through their nose."

The following week, when I take a group of girls out to lunch, they begin telling funny stories about times when their relatives got drunk. Michelle starts off the session telling about an incident in the Dominican Republic when her sister went to a party where there was alcohol and she drank from a cup that someone had put on the floor. That episode got her sister a good talking to by their father.

Justine told a similar story about going to a party where somebody put alcohol in the punch. When Justine drank from it, she got dizzy and her father (who works as a cook and counselor in a substance abuse counseling center) grounded her for three weeks. The person who put the alcohol in the punch was sent to jail. Justine went on to tell about an uncle who gives people money when he gets drunk. He once gave Justine $20.

Clarissa has a similar story to tell. When her mother is drunk, Clarissa says, she gives her children more money than usual. Her uncle does the same thing. This same uncle got into a fight with a man over the man's girlfriend. The uncle's sister, Clarissa's aunt, rushed to her brother's defense, threatening to kill the man with a knife.

Violence and family solidarity are intertwined. The next thing Clarissa tells me is that today is "family day." Her mother is going to buy pretzels, and the whole family is going to stay together and play games. More good news: with the money her family anticipates receiving for participating in the research, Clarissa got new sneakers. Also, her mother is going to buy her a desk where she can do her homework.

A few days later, Mrs. Ruiz asks me to meet her at the school so I can be present when she talks to Mrs. Howton about getting help for Clarissa. She tells me that she feels too shy to go there herself. On February 3, I meet Mrs. Ruiz at Loretta's office. Clarissa is proud that her mother has come to school. She goes out into the hallway to give her mother a big hug. I comment to Mrs. Ruiz that her facial expressions and Clarissa's are identical. Mrs. Lynns comes out of the classroom to greet Clarissa's mother as well. She, too, comments on their similar facial expressions.

After we wait for several minutes in front of Loretta's locked and dark office, I go down the hall to see Susie Martinez, CES 518's Parents Liaison, to ask her if she knows where Loretta can be found. I tell her that Loretta had mentioned to me the possibility that the resource room teacher would begin an "emergency intervention" with Clarissa. Susie informs me that Loretta had to leave for an hour. Since Mrs. Ruiz is waiting, and Susie is the school's Parent Liaison, Susie offers to meet with Clarissa's mother in Loretta's stead.

Susie asks Mrs. Ruiz if she prefers to speak in English or Spanish. Mrs. Ruiz says she speaks both. The conversation continues in English. Susie begins by describing her

role as the school liaison with parents. She enumerates the education programs for parents that CES 518 conducts to prepare parents to help their children. One option, Susie explains, would be to teach Mrs. Ruiz how to teach Clarissa: the program is called "Reading Recovery." Mrs. Ruiz says nothing. Realizing that Mrs. Ruiz doesn't feel able to teach Clarissa to read, Susie mentions that she is trying to set up an after-school homework help group. She needs additional parent involvement. Could Mrs. Ruiz help? Mrs. Ruiz explains that she has four children going to school; she doesn't really have time to participate in an after-school program. Finally, Susie suggests that if Clarissa can get to school early in the morning, by 8:00 a.m., Susie herself will teach Clarissa phonics. Clarissa says that she always gets to school by 8 o'clock, and Susie says that she will talk to the security guard to give Clarissa a pass to enter the school early in the morning.

Throughout the conversation, Susie makes sure to praise Clarissa for working hard, for "making the effort." She suggests that the resource room teacher might provide additional help. Maybe Mrs. Pound, the resource room teacher, could take Clarissa out of the classroom during the school day, as she does with Carlos. Susie says that this is not certain; there have been cutbacks that reduce the amount of help the school can give children, but perhaps within the next few months, they may be able to set something up for Clarissa. Clarissa doesn't seem to like this idea. She would not look forward to being pulled out of Mrs. Lynns' class, away from her friends. Besides, getting singled out as needing help, as Carlos is every day when he leaves for the resource room, is the last thing Clarissa wants.

Since Clarissa seems unenthusiastic about getting resource room assistance, and since resources are limited, Susie asks again if there is someone at home who could help Clarissa. Her older sister? Any friends or classmates in the building where Clarissa lives? I mention that Clarissa often asks Lisette to help her. Mrs. Ruiz is skeptical; she doesn't know Lisette's mother. We agree that Clarissa and Lisette will ask Lisette's mother to allow the girls to study together.

Susie leaves the room to find a phonics book for Clarissa. While she is away, the principal stops by and I introduce him to Mrs. Ruiz. He doesn't appear to know who Clarissa is, and he looks uncomfortable. After he leaves, I try to introduce Mrs. Ruiz to Gilbert Reno, Clarissa's reading teacher. But he's busy disciplining one of his students, and I never get to make the introduction. Nevertheless, when Susie returns with the phonics book, Clarissa looks happier. Although Mrs. Ruiz has said very little, Clarissa is pleased that her mother has come to school and is happy to have a book from which to study.

## Evaluating Clarissa—The Process

After this meeting, the wheels continue to grind slowly and fitfully. One week after the meeting between Mrs. Ruiz and Susie Martinez, Shelley Howell (the school's

Educational Evaluator) comes to Mrs. Lynns' classroom to speak with Mrs. Lynns about Clarissa. She complains that Clarissa was done a disservice by being put in fifth grade when her reading score was only at the fourth percentile nationally. She suggests that Clarissa be evaluated to determine whether she suffers from any learning disabilities.

That same day Clarissa comes in late, explaining that her father and sister have overslept. As a result, she missed her appointment with Susie to learn phonics. It's a cold day, and Clarissa is shivering in her tee shirt. I bring her to Susie's office to see if Susie can find her a sweater to wear. Susie promises to look for one.

When I get home from school that day, I find a message from Mrs. Ruiz on my phone machine. She has received her first payment but is unable to cash it because the store won't accept a check made out to Clarissa. I call her back and suggest that she sign the check over to me, so I can cash it for her. Mrs. Ruiz tells me that Clarissa is feeling happy because she has gotten her new desk.

Although this is good news, things aren't going so well on other fronts. On February 24, Clarissa tells me she got to school late and once again missed her appointment with Mrs. Martinez. Susie tells me that she had been at a meeting until 8:15 a.m. and might have missed Clarissa. So far, Clarissa has been able to attend only one tutoring session, mostly because she's missed school because of a lingering ear infection. Both Susie Martinez and I are getting discouraged. Clarissa suggests that maybe Mrs. Martinez could be her reading teacher. When I relay this information to Susie, she tells me that Clarissa needs to be evaluated to find out why she forgets so easily. She also suggests that Clarissa has an attention problem.

I am troubled to hear that Mrs. Martinez believes that Clarissa has a learning disability, and I am frustrated because I know that no steps have yet been taken to refer Clarissa for an evaluation. I know the delay does not stem from indifference. In early March, the principal shows his concern for Clarissa by agreeing to allow her to attend the new after-school program, aimed at helping children who are reading near 50 percent reading level to raise their scores to above 50 percent on the upcoming important fifth grade reading test to be administered in April. The principal's decision means a lot to me. Clarissa is clearly not going to improve enough in one month to go over 50 percent, so giving her a spot in the program is not an "efficient" use of the school's money. Clarissa's need is recognized, however. CES 518 is trying to help her. (At the same time, I can't help but wonder about the wisdom of spending money to help children who have a chance to go from below 50 percent to above 50 percent, but not helping the children who are doing significantly worse.)

Ten days later, Clarissa is attending the after-school program, but nothing has been done yet to begin her educational evaluation. Working with Clarissa and some of her classmates that day helps me to see better where Clarissa's strengths and weaknesses lie. March 4 is the day students get back the tests, determing what reading

class they should be in. Mrs. Lynns asks me to work with Justine, who failed the test with a score of 54, but it turns out that Alicia and Clarissa have not done well on the test either, so I decide to work with all three girls.

When I begin going over Justine's test with her, we find some questions that ask students about how to use an almanac. Justine tells me she doesn't know what an almanac is; clearly, her low score reflects lack of general knowledge (as defined by American mainstream culture), not a specific reading problem.

When we get to a section that asks students to decide the base words of complex words, I discover that while Justine and Alicia have problems determining the correct answers, Clarissa can do these. But when we come to the reading comprehension section, all three girls have trouble. When the test asks students to identify the main idea of a paragraph, and there are two plausible answers, all three girls do no better than if they were randomly guessing.

After working with the girls, I tell Mrs. Lynns that Clarissa got the base word questions correct and, therefore, scored a 50 on the test. (Clarissa had not taken the test on the day it was given because, once again, she had been absent). Mrs. Lynns compliments Clarissa for getting half the questions right. Clarissa seems surprised to be praised.

Nicole scored a 65 on the test and requested that she work with Alicia, Clarissa, Justine and me, but Mrs. Lynns ruled that Nicole had to retake her math test before she could work with us. As the three girls and I report to Mrs. Lynns that we've gone over the reading test, Nicole begins to cry. Although Mrs. Lynns is gentle with her, Nicole continues weeping. I ask Mrs. Lynns if she wants me to talk with Nicole while she conducts the class, and she agrees.

When I ask Nicole what she wants to do, she doesn't answer and just keeps crying. I suggest that we go to the Parents' Association room. When we get there, Nicole refuses to tell me what's bothering her, but finally, she laughs when I make jokes about my asking her too many dumb questions. She agrees to go over the reading test with me.

When I go back to the classroom to pick up the reading test, Clarissa asks me if she can join us. I tell her that it's up to Nicole because Nicole is the one who is so upset. Nicole says it's okay for Clarissa to work with us, and we go over the wrong answers. Then the girls start retaking the test. By then, Nicole is feeling fine.

March 11 is the day we finally start making progress toward getting Clarissa appropriate help, but the day does not start out that way. Clarissa is sick, but she comes to school because she doesn't want to miss being fitted for her cap and gown. But before long, Clarissa complains that she's feeling too ill to stay in school and goes to the office to call her mother to come for her.

When Mrs. Ruiz comes to school, I take her downstairs to talk to Shelly Howell, who explains to her that to speed up the process of Clarissa's evaluation, Mrs. Ruiz could write a letter and bring it, by hand, to the District 9 Committee for Special Education. Mrs. Howell takes the opportunity to explain the evaluation process to Mrs. Ruiz and offers to let Clarissa do a reading program with her after school on Mondays and Fridays, in addition to the Wednesday after-school program that Clarissa has recently begun.

I am not surprised by Shelly's aggressive offer of help; Loretta has already told me that when Shelly takes up a student's cause, she is capable of prodigious efforts. A friend, Virginia Patou, whom I met through Loretta, always praises Mrs. Howell "to the sky" for finding resources to help her own son overcome his severe reading problems. (Mrs. Howell's efforts get Virginia's son admitted to a private boarding school for children with learning disabilities, but the school's scholarship offer is insufficient, and Virginia must decline it.)

Mrs. Howell's encouragement spurs Mrs. Ruiz to act immediately. She agrees to file the request, and asks me to sit down and write the letter. I write the letter, Mrs. Ruiz signs it, and then she asks me to drive her to the headquarters of the Committee on Special Education, where she can file the papers.

We drop Clarissa off at home and drive down Tremont Avenue, the neighborhood's main commercial street. On the way, Mrs. Ruiz shares more of her family's history. She tells me that her oldest daughter, Blanca, had been held over in fourth grade at CES 518, but she has never learned to read well. Her youngest daughter, Theresa, is the best reader of her four children.

Mrs. Ruiz tells me that she came to New York from Puerto Rico when she was three and has never returned to visit. Her two sisters return frequently, however. When I tell Mrs. Ruiz how much I had enjoyed visiting Puerto Rico in the winter time, she replies that she would like to visit there, too, but not to live. She also mentions that when she was a schoolgirl, her mother never came to school and paid no attention to her education.

When our car passes Junior High School 22, Mrs. Ruiz tells me that she doesn't like the school because there is too much fighting—Dominicans against Puerto Ricans. "Everyone is racist," Mrs. Ruiz says. Last year, she tells me, a teacher was killed at Junior High School 22. Junior High School 147, which Blanca attends, is better, and it's nearer their home.

At this point, I feel confident enough to ask Mrs. Ruiz about her husband's employment. She tells me that Mr. Vega is not working and that the family lives on welfare. The family doesn't have much money, Mrs. Ruiz says, but the Supplemental Security Income check that Theresa receives really helps. Her husband usually works as an assistant to building janitors, painting and taking out

garbage. His last job paid only $100 for two days work, so Mr. Vega quit. He's having a hard time finding new jobs because when employers discover he doesn't speak English, they won't hire him.

We arrive at the headquarters of the Committee on Special Education and sit in a waiting room for thirty minutes before Mrs. Ruiz is admitted beyond the locked door by an armed security guard. During this time, she tells me that her children have been having stomach pains, which she blames on food from the school cafeterias. "If I had more money," she tells me, "I'd bring all my kids lunch." Blanca's stomach pain has been so severe and persistent that Mrs. Ruiz is planning to bring her to the doctor's office to have her checked.

As she talks to me, Mrs. Ruiz yawns over and over again. Catching herself, she smiles and tells me she yawns all the time. It's because she can't fall asleep until two or three in the morning, she says. Finally, Mrs. Ruiz is allowed to present her letter to a clerk. He tells her that it will take a week for the evaluation process to begin.

## Getting Help for Clarissa

When I see Mrs. Howell the following week, she tells me that my bringing the letter to the office of the Committee on Special Education with Clarissa's mother has done a lot of good: Clarissa is now scheduled to begin the evaluation next week. Shelly tells me that she will not be part of the evaluation process because she does not speak Spanish. I tell her that Clarissa and her mother both speak English; while saying this to Shelly, I can't help but wonder why she made the assumption that a Spanish-speaking examiner was needed. Mrs. Howell tells me that the social worker will determine this point when she fills out a language survey while interviewing Clarissa's mother. "Maybe I *will* be able to do Clarissa's educational assessment," Mrs. Howell concludes.

By this time, two months have gone by since I discovered that Clarissa's reading is weak, and Clarissa has had only one extra reading session—with Susie Martinez, in February. Clarissa has made it clear to me that she doesn't want to have to repeat fifth grade when all her classmates go on to middle school. If Clarissa doesn't get intensive help immediately, how is she going to graduate? Concerned that Clarissa begin receiving help immediately, I ask Mrs. Howell if she has begun working with Clarissa. "No," she tells me, "Clarissa did not begin her reading tutorial last Friday, because Mrs. Ruiz was sick and Clarissa had to go home." Mrs. Howell was working at another school on Monday and had scheduled Clarissa for Tuesday, not realizing that Tuesday was a half day. Mrs. Howell must complete a program this Friday, so she won't be able to work with Clarissa until next week.

She'll start reading with Clarissa on Monday and Tuesday of next week.

The next time I see Clarissa is March 20, the dreadful day that Mrs. Lynns is absent and Nicole breaks down after writing "I hate myself" on the blackboard (see Chapter One). On the way out of the building with Nicole and Clarissa, Clarissa checks in with Mrs. Howell to see if we can use her office. Mrs. Howell tells her that she's testing a student now and can't help us out; she also gives Clarissa a hug and tells her she can't wait to start working with her. Clarissa is beaming, delighted at all the affection and attention she's getting. When I take the girls (and Virginia Patou) to the Italian section of the Bronx for lunch, Clarissa can't stop talking. She entertains Nicole until Nicole forgets her misery. In the car, returning to the school after lunch, Nicole and Clarissa discover they both have older sisters who have been left back. They agree they have a lot in common.

By March 30, Clarissa and Mrs. Howell have a reading tutorial scheduled for the afternoon when they will work on phonics. While Clarissa is in Mrs. Howell's office, showing off her work, Mrs. Howell pulls out her candy jar and lets Clarissa select a reward. She tells me that she thinks Clarissa could benefit from the private boarding school that has accepted Virginia's son. Again, I'm puzzled. The school's tuition, even with a generous scholarship, is way beyond the means of Virginia's family. How in the world could Clarissa's family afford to send her there? Virginia has been working hard with Mrs. Howell for two years to get her son into an appropriate private program; I can't imagine Clarissa's family doing the same. Even if they could get Clarissa admitted, would they want Clarissa to live away from the family? Would Clarissa really want to leave her mother, father, sisters, and brother? I'm careful not to say anything to Mrs. Howell that would imply that I think that Clarissa will apply.

On April 7, I call Clarissa and her mother in the evening to check on how things are going. Clarissa is excited; she says that when the family receives its next payment for participating in the research, they're going to use part of the money to begin buying a computer, on layaway, and use the rest to buy more things for her room. The room is ugly now, Clarissa tells me, but it will become beautiful. The reading assistance she is getting from Mrs. Howell helps, Clarissa tells me. She stayed after school today until five o'clock, working on phonics and writing. She's also been staying after school on Wednesdays with other students from Mrs. Lynns' class. At first, Clarissa tells me, she thought these sessions were going to be boring, but they're not. The children help each other and make jokes and it's fun. Tomorrow, she's going to be tested. (Mrs. Howell will do the educational evaluation.) One of Clarissa's friends told her that the test would take a long time.

The next day when I come to Mrs. Lynns' classroom, I'm surprised to see Clarissa; I thought she would be with Mrs. Howell. I ask Clarissa why she's not downstairs doing her test, and she tells me she's not feeling well. Mrs. Howell sent her to the nurse, who took Clarissa's temperature and said it was normal. However,

Mrs. Howell decided that if Clarissa wasn't feeling well, she shouldn't take the test. Clarissa is now sitting in class feeling miserable. I feel Clarissa's neck, which seems warm, so I tell Mrs. Lynns, who tells Clarissa to go to the office and call her mother. Clarissa calls home from Mrs. Howton's office. Her father answers the phone and tells Clarissa that he isn't feeling well enough to pick her up at school. He says it will be fine if I take Clarissa home. When we report this to Mrs. Lynns, she reminds me to go downstairs to tell the School Office that I am taking Clarissa home. (I'm surprised that Clarissa has told Mrs. Lynns that her father answered the phone. Usually, Clarissa pretends that her father doesn't live with them.) When I go to the office, the school secretary, Clara Diaz, tells me that if a parent isn't taking Clarissa from school, then two school personnel have to sign her out and take her home. Mrs. Diaz begins asking if a man in the office can accompany us to Clarissa's house, but at that moment, Loretta comes into the office and agrees to come with me. I make a joke about whether the school has dropped me from the approved list, but Loretta tells me that the school is being super vigilant, because the day before they let a child go home with a noncustodial parent, and the custodial parent came to complain. We walk to my car to drive Clarissa home. When we arrive at Clarissa's building, I ask Loretta if she wants to accompany us in the elevator to ensure Clarissa's safety (from me), but Loretta tells me that she doesn't go into the projects. Since Clarissa is in the car when Loretta says this, I think her remark insensitive. Loretta waits in the car while I go up the elevator with Clarissa. Clarissa's father meets us at the apartment door.

On April 11, Clarissa gets into a fight in the lunch yard. When the class returns from the playground, they surround me, recounting the details of the fight. I ask the students who were most involved to meet with me in the teachers' lounge. I seat the children at a large round table, where teachers usually take their coffee breaks, and ask each child to tell me what happened. Apparently, the trouble started when Clarissa came up to Velvet and asked her if she was going to fight with Omega, who had been discovered going through Velvet's desk. Velvet became angry at Clarissa and threatened her. Then Clarissa punched her and knocked off her glasses. Children from Mrs. Lynns' class tried to separate the girls. Velvet felt threatened by all the children surrounding her. Shakur, a friend of Velvet's sister, tried to protect Velvet but she got angry at him and hit him, while warning that she was going to get her sister and her friends to beat up all of the children who had threatened her.

After all of the participants tell their story, it is clear that everyone blames Velvet for the trouble. She's been getting into fights almost every day; usually Alicia is her opponent, but today Clarissa got involved.

Velvet is the new girl in Mrs. Lynns' class. She is a fourth grader who has been assigned to this fifth grade classroom because none of the fourth grade teachers want her in their classrooms because she's disruptive. In her new classroom, Velvet is isolated and lost. Although she is bright, she is unable to do much of the

academic work because she is missing some of the skills and knowledge required of fifth graders. She is not accepted socially since she arrived in midyear, after children had formed their cliques and friendships. Because Velvet is unable to complete some of the work, feels isolated, and is full of anger, she has become a disruptive force in the class. Thirty children were quite enough for Mrs. Lynns to handle; an angry thirty-first student makes the classroom more tense and more difficult than usual. The mere fact that Mrs. Lynns has been asked to take Velvet reflects everyone's confidence in Mrs. Lynns. If anyone can cope with Velvet's presence, it is Mrs. Lynns.

At this point, I try to tell both girls why they should avoid trouble. Clarissa seems willing to listen, although she has made it clear to me before, that in her family, people are expected to fight to protect themselves. Velvet, however, tunes me out; it's as if the whole hullabaloo has nothing to do with her.

When I come back to the classroom, Mrs. Lynns is returning the practice reading tests the students took earlier in the week. The class average is 27. Some of the best test-takers, Annette and Mariaelena, got 35 and 34 correct, respectively. Clarissa's score is 19, the second lowest in the class. Alicia, who had been in bilingual classes before this year, scores 16. Mrs. Lynns comments that 19 is not a bad score for Clarissa.

The next week Mrs. Lynns' class takes the city-wide standardized reading test, which is important for Clarissa because School Chancellor Crew has announced that children scoring below 25 percent on the test will be held back. At her home that evening, Clarissa tells me that the proctor brought in to administer the test and to prevent cheating looked at Clarissa while she filled out her answer sheet and suggested to her which of the first forty questions she should recheck. Clarissa believes that the proctor did the same thing with Alicia.

I ask Clarissa why she thinks the proctor gave her advice. "She wanted us to get higher grades," Clarissa replies. But Clarissa doesn't feel the same way about Mrs. Lynns. "She doesn't want me to pass," Clarissa says. "How do you think you did on the test?" I ask. "I got most of the first forty questions correct," Clarissa answers.

Clarissa's account of the testing session surprises me since I had been told by several people that CES 518 was unusual because it did not "cheat" to get high test scores. I don't know whether Clarissa's account is accurate and, if accurate, whether the practice she describes is widespread. I do know, however, that CES 518 is now on a list of schools under review because its students' test scores have been lagging. I have been told by several people that the personnel at CES 518 believe that this is because the present principal put an end to cheating when he became principal. As evidence of this, people pointed out to me that the school's scores dropped dramatically and immediately as soon as he became principal. Since then, as his reforms took effect, the students' scores have been creeping back up.[16]

My visit to Clarissa's home that night is one of the most comfortable sessions I have had with her family. We start out eating the chocolate cake I've brought from a bakery in my own community, with the three youngest children sitting around the dining room table giving me the latest family news. Theresa tells me that she always gets 100 percent on her tests. When she finishes telling me about her school successes, Clarissa gives me a tour of the new features of the apartment, beginning with her room. She shows me the double bed where she and Theresa sleep. Also in the room is a desk, bought with the research money. On Clarissa's dresser is a glass bowl with Chinese fighting fish in it. On the door is a sign, "Konck Before Entering." I mention to Theresa that the word "knock" is spelled wrong. She rearranges the letters.

Clarissa shows me the aquarium and fish in the living room, where there are also two parakeets. Clarissa says her mother bought them with the research money.

Mrs. Ruiz, who had been mopping the floor when I arrived, apologizes for the mess: the house isn't as neat as it was on my first visit. The couch is piled with the children's school bags. Flintstone cartoons are playing on the TV, but no one is watching. Mr. Vega and Jennifer have gone out to shop. When they return, Mr. Vega takes a beer out of the shopping bag and pours some for his wife.

Clarissa shows me a book Mrs. Howell has lent her—*Surviving School When You are LD*. She tells me that LD means "learning differently." Clarissa has already shown the book to her mother and has started looking at the book herself. I ask her about the assessment test Mrs. Howell gave her, and she says that Mrs. Howell told her that her math was good. The hardest part of the test had to do with spatial relationships, Clarissa tells me.

When I leave that evening, Mrs. Ruiz and Clarissa accompany me downstairs, and we walk to the local convenience store together. Clarissa tells me that tomorrow is Mariaelena's birthday and suggests that I buy her a Mickey Mouse birthday balloon at the store. After I complete my purchase, I return home.

The next day, Mrs. Howell tells me about her assessment of Clarissa. She says that she will recommend that Clarissa receive resource room services. This is the lowest level of intervention provided for someone designated learning disabled. This means that after Clarissa is officially certified as being learning disabled, she will be taken out of her regular class for one hour each day to work with a specially trained teacher in a small group setting. This is the level of help that Carlos is receiving; Clarissa has already indicated that she doesn't want to be pulled out of

[16]Not everyone agrees with this story. One teacher I spoke with said that students' scores used to be higher because the students in the area came from stronger, more stable families. When I reported this opinion to Loretta, she disagreed vehemently.

the class, as Carlos is. Mrs. Howell also will recommend that Clarissa be left back for a year because she is immature and has some learning problems. She also says that Clarissa should be provided counseling at school because she is too dependent on Mrs. Howell and me. Furthermore, she suggests that I attend the Educational Planning Conference, which will be held during the first week of May.

## Getting to Know Clarissa's Family

As the Educational Planning Conference approaches, Mrs. Ruiz asks me to accompany her. Although I have some reservations, fearing that I will be seen as overstepping my boundaries as a researcher, I agree to come, since Mrs. Ruiz seems to really want my presence. As we await the Conference, I get drawn deeper into Clarissa's family.

On April 29, when I come to school, Clarissa signals me to come to her desk and tells me she wants to talk to me right away. It's the last day for students to make their payments for the class trips to Medieval Times and the Liberty Science Center, and she needs me to cash a research check so she can go on the trips. She also needs money for new sneakers, she tells me. Getting money at once for Clarissa will be difficult for me right then; I will have to drive well out of the neighborhood to find a cash machine. I ask Clarissa if she can wait until tomorrow. Clarissa is determined not to miss going on the trips with her friends, so she asks me to call her mother to ask her if she needs the money immediately. I confer with the teacher who organized the trip to the Liberty Science Center, and with Mrs. Lynns, who organized the trip to Medieval Times, and they assure me that they will sign Clarissa up today if I can get them the money tomorrow. Then I call Mrs. Ruiz, who says it will be fine if I can give her the money for the sneakers tomorrow.

During a conversation with June Innes, a third grade teacher, she tells me that she was Clarissa's reading teacher the previous year. She says that Clarissa is not dyslexic, but she has not learned basic phonics. Clarissa's lack of progress probably stems from not getting help at home, June tells me, but she also thinks the school made a mistake when Clarissa was not left back in fourth grade. Staying back then would not have been so traumatic, June believes, but after fifth grade, it would be more so.

After I return to Mrs. Lynns's classroom to tell Clarissa what arrangements I've made to get her mother money, she tells me that her father has lost his job. "Could you help him get a job?" Clarissa asks me. I tell her I'll ask some people in the neighborhood if they have any ideas, but I make no promises. Weeks later, while Clarissa and I are attending a ceremony marking the unveiling of the mural done by the Arts Connection group, I introduce her to the principal, explaining that Clarissa wants to ask him for help. She asks if there is any way her father can be

hired to do custodial work at the school. The principal answers Clarissa gently, telling her that there is a procedure for hiring custodial assistants; Clarissa's father should come to the school to obtain an application, fill it out, and submit it to the school custodian.

Clarissa's request that I help her father find a job spurs me to realize that I know little about Mr. Vega because I have never tried to cross the language barrier. I decide to ask him if I can interview him with the help of a translator. When he agrees, I bring a friend from work to visit Clarissa's family. While I entertain Mrs. Ruiz and her younger children, my colleague, Gloria, interviews Mr. Vega in Spanish. He tells us a horrific story.

When the interview begins, Mr. Vega puts down the motor vehicle manual he is reading in Spanish. Gloria asks him why he's reading the manual, and he explains that he wants to obtain a driver's license. He knows how to drive, he says, and has been driving since he was ten years old when his father put two chair cushions under him and let him crane his neck to see through the steering wheel, but he's never had a driver's license. He even had a car, bought with the assistance of a friend, but one day it was towed away, and Mr. Vega decided that paying the parking tickets would cost more than the car was worth. Now he would like to buy another car, this time under his own name.

Gloria asks him why he's reading the manual in Spanish, and Mr. Vega responds that it's the only language he reads. He says that he can understand English a little bit, but can't read it well. He doesn't speak it well, either, because his pronunciation is wrong. He wants to pronounce words differently than they should be.

Mr. Vega shares information about his background. He was born in Puerto Rico. When his mother abandoned the family, José lived with his step-grandmother, grandfather, and father. His step-grandmother didn't take care of him or feed him; he didn't go to school because he looked dirty and was hungry. His father, however, "always looked after me. He would bring me food, and always make sure I had something to eat." When he was old enough, he began to work with his father, who was employed by the state lifting garbage drums. His father paid him as an assistant. When he was young, José spent his money on alcohol and women. His father died when he was 13. On the day before his father died, he had felt something rupture inside him. He tried to get medical assistance, but the doctors told him that there was no room for him in the hospital. He died the next day.

In 1968, when he was 13 years old, Mr. Vega went to Chicago, where he lived with his uncle. He didn't attend school and started drinking and using drugs. His uncle sent him back to Puerto Rico, but Mr. Vega had trouble with the law, so he returned to the United States, where he's lived ever since.

In 1980, he met his wife, Annette, when he rented a room in her family's house. Soon they fell in love. In 1981, they moved to Massachusetts for four months to start their own household, but he couldn't find a job that paid enough to support them. They've lived in the Bronx ever since. (Actually, he tells me, they have never married.)

At this point, I tell Mr. Vega, in English, that Clarissa asked the principal if he could help her father get a job as a school janitor. In Spanish, Mr. Vega responds that he can't apply for such a job because he's participated in a substance abuse program for the past three years. If he applies for any job that requires that he give a urine sample, he has to withdraw because the sample will reveal that he's taking methadone as a way to avoid using heroin. Mr. Vega hopes to find a job that doesn't require a drug test, preferably in Manhattan, where wages are higher than in the Bronx. He used to have a regular job at the Westchester Country Club as a groundskeeper, he recounts, but after six years, he lost the job because of lack of transportation. Since then, he's been doing odd jobs, painting and fixing things. "Whenever my friends call me for any little paint jobs, I just go," Mr. Vega relates.

Gloria and I leave, reeling, after completing the interview. I press Gloria to recount every detail she can remember. I'm stunned that Mr. Vega has been so open and marvel what a difference bringing someone who speaks his language has made. By now, I'm feeling extremely close to Clarissa's family.

I anticipate the Education Planning Conference with great interest. For several years, my wife has been describing these conferences to me, but I've always heard about them from the professionals' point of view. Now I'll be participating as a friend of the family.

## Attending The Educational Planning Conference

When the Conference finally occurs, May 11, it's almost anticlimactic. Mrs. Ruiz is very nervous and says little, but there's no liquor on her breath and she listens carefully to what the social worker, psychologist, and educational evaluator all have to say. From a parent's point of view, Education Planning Conferences are odd. The evaluators read long reports, which are written using highly technical terms, with few pauses for explanations or questions. Most of the details are impossible to absorb, but the highlights are clear enough. Clarissa fits the definition of learning disabled and will be classified as such so she can receive additional assistance. Her math and social skills are both okay; her reading and language skills are her major problem. She needs resource room help; however, her learning problems are not so severe that she needs to be placed in a separate class for the learning disabled.

Mrs. Ruiz listens carefully to the reports, which last almost forty-five minutes. At the end, she accepts the diagnosis of learning disability and agrees that Clarissa can be provided with resource room help. She asks whether Clarissa will be allowed to graduate from fifth grade in June and is told that this is a decision that her teacher, the assistant principal, and the principal will all make, not the evaluation team.

When we leave, Mrs. Ruiz hungrily lights up a cigarette. I can imagine what an intimidating experience this has been.

During the last four weeks of school, the school-based team, Mrs. Ruiz, Clarissa, Loretta, and the principal discuss whether Clarissa should be allowed to move on to sixth grade. Clarissa makes it very clear that she thinks she should graduate; it is painful for her to contemplate being separated from her classmates and friends who will be going on to middle school. Indeed, it's the very thing Clarissa has been avoiding for the past three years. The school personnel are of mixed minds; they just are not sure that Clarissa will be able to handle sixth grade work, even with the assistance of a resource room teacher. The results of the city-wide reading test are not encouraging. Clarissa's reading has not improved relative to the nationwide population taking the test; she's still down in the fourth percentile. Although her math score is better, it's still substantially below average. According to the chancellor's guidelines, Clarissa should be left behind in the fifth grade.

While these matters are being discussed, Mrs. Lynns' students are eagerly preparing themselves for graduation. There is a prom scheduled. Dresses must be ordered, dates must be arranged, appointments with beauticians must be booked. Then there's the graduation ceremony itself, which requires an elegant dress, formal shoes, and complicated logistical planning.

Mrs. Ruiz tries to put off purchasing Clarissa's clothing as late as possible to be sure that before the money is spent, she knows that Clarissa will be allowed to graduate. Finally, she has to decide; if she doesn't buy Clarissa's dress, it will be too late.

Ultimately, Mrs. Lynns and Loretta recommend to the principal, with considerable misgiving, that Clarissa be allowed to graduate, and he accepts their decision. Clarissa attends the prom and is thrilled. The entire family attends her graduation ceremony, and Clarissa ends the school year happy. I promise to keep in touch; she writes "I Love You" in my yearbook.

## My Reflections

Clarissa's story does not have an unhappy ending. In the fall after her year in Mrs. Lynns' class, Clarissa's mother ends up reenrolling Clarissa in CES 518, to repeat

fifth grade, because there is no space for Clarissa in the middle school that Mrs. Ruiz prefers. Although Clarissa and her mother are angry at first (Mrs. Ruiz certainly resents having bought Clarissa a graduation dress only to have her repeat the grade), Clarissa likes her new teacher and is pleased with her academic progress. She receives resource room help, which she doesn't like very much, but she also gets intensive and effective reading instruction from her reading teacher. Clarissa completes fifth grade successfully and begins middle school the following fall. She reports that her grades are better than before and that her reading is good.

While writing this story about Clarissa's experiences in fifth grade, I have been filled with worry. Have I betrayed the trust of Clarissa and her family, of Mrs. Lynns, of my sister-in-law? Have I been unfair? Have I portrayed my subjects and the school in an overly negative light? Have I committed the ethnographer's archetypical sin, assuming myself to be normal and everyone else to be in need of explanation?

Certainly, I did not begin this study being judgmental. It was not, and is not, my objective to apportion blame for Clarissa's slow progress. I started out hoping to learn what facilitated and what obstructed cultural interchange between Clarissa and her family, on the one hand, and the school community on the other. What made it possible for the Vega-Ruiz family to learn from and understand the school's culture so the family could support Clarissa's learning and Clarissa could learn the things she needed to learn to succeed in school? What made it possible for members of the school community to learn from the Vega-Ruiz family culture so the school could support Clarissa's learning? Conversely, what made it difficult?

I decided to write about Clarissa's experience in a first-person narrative, including myself as a participant in the story and as a subjective observer of what took place. My decision was based on my realization that there is no way to disentangle my data from my own perception of events. I can make every effort to find out how the other participants perceived things, and I did; I can present their own interpretation of events as well as my own, and I have tried to do so; I can obtain and present their reactions to my narrative and integrate that into my analysis, and that is something I am planning to do. Nevertheless, in the end, this ethnography is, and must be, my interpretation of events, and so I have tried to present it as such, not as "the truth," not as the objective record of an omniscient observer, but as the record of one particular human being, someone as open to the reader, as available for questioning and critique, as all of the other subjects of my story.

When I went home with Clarissa the first time, in early January, I realized her reading problems were not being fully addressed by the school; I then asked teachers and administrators why they thought this had happened. Their answer was that Clarissa was a child who did not call attention to herself, who got along with others, who tried to conceal the problems she was having. Such children can be overlooked, I was repeatedly told, because CES 518 has so many other children with pressing problems, children who are fighting, disrupting classes, or failing to

learn English. This is certainly true; I experienced firsthand how overwhelmingly needy the students of Mrs. Lynns' class were collectively, how close anger and even violence were to the surface. Whenever I had to cope with the thirty-one students on my own, when Mrs. Lynns went to the vice-principal's office, for example, I experienced how much it required just to keep the students focused—on anything. Certainly, there were other children in the class whose needs were more apparent: Carlos often did not connect with the class emotionally or academically; Shakur and Velvet frequently erupted angrily; Nicole, Luther, and Justine often showed sadness or signs of depression. With all of these compelling needs being expressed, it was easy to pass over Clarissa, who always made an effort, always related to her peers, rarely admitted to not knowing something.

School personnel told me that "hard-to-see children," like Clarissa, needed to have parents aggressively advocating for them. When the students failed to progress, their parents needed to ask their teachers what was wrong, how the family could help. If they got no satisfaction, they needed to bring the issue to the attention of the vice-principal and principal.

School personnel did not simply try to pass the burden of responsibility onto the parents. The school spent some of its scarce resources on parent education programs that tried to help mothers and fathers understand what their children were being taught, how they could work with their children at home, and where they could go for help. Mrs. Martinez, the school's parent coordinator, aggressively recruited parents; she supported and nourished the Parents' Association, and she reached out to individual children and parents. Furthermore, CES 518 provided professional development programs for teachers, some of which explicitly addressed how teachers could work with parents effectively. The case study of Luther and his family shows how effective such programs can be (see Chapter 3).

CES 518 went well beyond "business-as-usual" in providing opportunities for parents and school personnel to learn to work together to support student learning. The Elementary Teachers' Network program that helped Luther was funded by a grant proposal that the principal wrote and endorsed; the crisis-intervention counselors who supported Nicole and her sister were hired on Federal grants for which the principal applied; and the parent education programs and the Parents' Association received grant funding for which the school had aggressively reached out.

Nevertheless, despite these efforts, Clarissa's reading problems were not addressed aggressively until I intervened, and even after I began alerting school personnel to the critical nature of her problems, it took an additional five months before Clarissa was properly evaluated and certified as being eligible for additional resources.

School personnel told me that Clarissa's experience distressed them, but they said that similar things will keep happening to children whose parents are not aggressive advocates for them.

What can I contribute by drawing on what I came to know about Mr. Vega and Mrs. Ruiz from getting to know them with the assistance of $1,000 of Federal research funding? After talking with Clarissa's parents, I know now how terrible their own school experiences had been. It's not difficult for me to imagine how uncomfortable dealing with Clarissa's teachers must be for Mr. Vega, who doesn't speak much English, and for Mrs. Ruiz, who was retained in ninth grade four times.

It seemed that Mrs. Ruiz would only press for Clarissa to be given additional help if she had me with her to smooth the way with school personnel, to write letters and fill out forms, and to provide support and explanations. Perhaps this is unfair; Mrs. Ruiz did obtain appropriate help for Theresa, her youngest daughter, with the assistance of my sister-in-law and others. But I did not see Mrs. Ruiz act on Theresa's behalf. Since my only experience was with Clarissa's case, I sensed that Mrs. Ruiz was reluctant to move unless I was there with her.

My recollection of one encounter with authorities makes it easier for me to understand Mrs. Ruiz's reluctance. On the day that we visited the headquarters of the Committee on Special Education to deliver the letter requesting that Clarissa be evaluated, all of the signs were discouraging. We were met at the door by an armed guard who challenged us before agreeing we could enter. We were told to wait without being given any explanation of what was taking place or what the office procedures would be. We were made to wait for thirty minutes, although all we were doing was dropping off a letter. The entire message of this experience was that parents seeking help were neither welcome nor respected.

As I write this, I remember that the official directing the Committee on Special Education is someone I know and respect, someone whose good intentions, professionalism, and expertise I can attest to. Nevertheless, for Mrs. Ruiz, who doesn't have a car, who doesn't have money to spare to spend on a taxi, and who had her own bad experiences in school, going to the Committee on Special Education to ask for Clarissa to receive additional services is certainly discouraging.

Keep in mind that it was not easy for Mrs. Ruiz to even have a letter to submit. She did not feel capable of drafting such a letter, and school personnel felt that it would be inappropriate for them to do so. Because of my research and my selection of Clarissa's family as a study subject, I was available, but had I not been there, who would have written the letter? (If Mrs. Ruiz could not write the letter, Clarissa's chances for special resources would have depended on her teacher requesting the evaluation; none of Clarissa's teachers in third, fourth, or fifth grade had ever done so.)

Furthermore, the Educational Planning Conference was similarly off-putting. While the professionals on the school-based support team followed proper procedures, they didn't specifically address Mrs. Ruiz. They communicate in the language of professionals, establishing their authority and expertise, but the effect

is not to assure the mother that her child is in good hands; rather, the effect is to intimidate her.

Despite CES 518 making major strides in establishing partnerships with parents, to Mrs. Ruiz and to other parents like her, the school repeatedly sends out signals that it does not respect her, nor does it welcome her participation. For instance, when Clarissa is required to write all of her homework in cursive script, how is Mrs. Ruiz supposed to monitor Clarissa, much less help her? When Clarissa's report card consists of a long series of ratings, without narrative or description, how can Mrs. Ruiz conclude that the school values her support in teaching Clarissa? How can parents believe that the school really wants them to be a partner when the parent-teacher conference is a fifteen-minute affair; when parents must bring their children with no child care provided; when parents must wait in line because there are no scheduled appointments?

In some ways, things are even more difficult for Clarissa. She enters Mrs. Lynns' class in September, unfamiliar with her teacher's style or expectations, while more than half the class know Mrs. Lynns from the previous year. Mrs. Lynns writes on the blackboard in cursive script and demands that Clarissa begin writing in cursive script as well. As a result, Clarissa cannot read what is written on the board during class, cannot read her homework assignments, and cannot even read her own handwriting.

Furthermore, school for Clarissa is a constant effort to keep up with a curriculum that marches relentlessly forward, even though Clarissa has not mastered necessary skills in previous years. Clarissa is not bad at math, but how can she keep up when she cannot read the math problems? The prescribed curriculum has little flexibility to meet Clarissa's needs. Her teachers have so many other things to worry about that it is difficult to recognize when one student gets lost at sea.

CHAPTER

# 3

# Learning with Luther and His Mother

When you first see Luther Arjay, your impression is that he is a very shy boy. He's good-looking, but he holds his body tight and rarely shows emotion. He speaks so softly that it is easy to miss what he is saying; with adults, he rarely volunteers anything.

In November, Mrs. Lynns confided to me that she was concerned about Luther. He had run away from home earlier in the fall, only to be picked up by the police on a busy highway; he often came to school listless, without his homework completed. When I ask Mrs. Lynns what is troubling Luther, she whispers that Luther's mother once mentioned, during an emergency visit to the school, that there are marital tensions at home. (Mrs. Arjay is an immigrant from the Dominican Republic and a Jehovah's Witness; Mr. Arjay is from Guyana and of East Indian descent.)

While Mrs. Lynns' usual practice is to discipline students and inform their parents when they do not turn in their homework regularly, she does not reprimand Luther nor does she warn him that she will have to talk to his mother about it because, she told me, she does not want to burden the family with additional stress.

Mrs. Lynns' willingness to accommodate to Luther's situation is evident at the first parent-teacher conference in November. Mrs. Arjay, a tall, youthful woman who speaks English with only a slight accent, comes in with Luther and his two younger brothers, Jean, 7, and Lionel, 5, both of whom also attend CES 518. She listens gravely as Mrs. Lynns describes Luther's lethargic classroom behavior, nods in agreement that he is having a difficult time, and expresses her willingness to do whatever she can to help Mrs. Lynns and Luther. At no time does Mrs. Lynns suggest that Mrs. Arjay punish Luther, nor does she pressure him to do his work.

Mrs. Arjay began dropping in on the classroom to check with Mrs. Lynns about Luther's progress. Whenever I was present, I would supervise class work while the two women talked in whispers at the back of the room. However, one day in December when Mrs. Arjay arrived, Mrs. Lynns was busy teaching so I volun-

teered to talk with her. I tell her that Luther often seems sad and tired in class; she responds by explaining that Luther had experienced a kidney problem two years earlier; ever since, he has suffered from the side effects of his medication as well as from depression. Just recently, she tells me, Luther seems to be regaining his full strength, but she still worries about his apparent indifference to his schoolwork.

After I talk with Mrs. Arjay and experience her concern and caring for her son, I begin to notice Luther more frequently. As I walk around the classroom while Mrs. Lynns gives lessons and assigns problems, I often find him with his head down on his desk. When I approach him and ask if he knows how to do the work, he gathers himself together; sometimes he shakes his head with a half smile and asks me for help; other times, he gets right to work. Luther rarely has great difficulty mastering new concepts; once he applies himself or listens to my explanation and tries out a practice problem, he can proceed with confidence and ease. Paying attention to the teacher and getting to work are his biggest problems.

One day when the students were coloring in fruit cutouts for a Thanksgiving bulletin board, I stopped to admire Luther's pear, so round and juicy it looked ready to eat. That's when I learned that Luther was an accomplished artist, one of the stars of Mrs. Gordon's art classes. Curious to see what Luther was like when he was working at something he liked and was good at, I followed Mrs. Lynns' students to the art room the next week. Located on the fifth and top floor of CES 518, the art room was filled with sunlight, and all kinds of posters and art works hung on the walls. At the front of the room was a huge blackboard covered with handwritten announcements of various city-wide art contests.

After making some announcements, Mrs. Gordon, a large, dark-skinned woman with a serious expression, begins demonstrating how to draw a knee in correct proportion to the human body. When she finishes her explanation, the children begin drawing while she circulates around the room, making suggestions. Most children work intently on their own, silently concentrating on rendering curves and maintaining proper proportion. A few students, the ones who lack confidence in their drawing skills, anxiously watch their neighbors work and frown with dismay at what they perceive as their own clumsy efforts. Luther is like a man possessed, aware only of his sketch and the illustration Mrs. Gordon has drawn.

When I tell Mrs. Lynns about how seriously Luther has been working in the art room, she tells me that Luther is so talented that he has been selected to participate in a special program called Arts Connection. Every week, Mrs. Lynns explains, Luther and two of his classmates go up to Mrs. Gordon's classroom to work with a visiting artist on a school project—painting a mural to decorate the walls of the modular early elementary school classrooms across the street.

Soon I begin going upstairs to follow Luther whenever he works on the mural. The mural painters, I realize, have much greater freedom than they usually

enjoy in their academic classrooms. For example, while students in Mrs. Lynns' classroom color in outlined fruit for the Thanksgiving bulletin board, the visiting artist asks the children to select the animals that will populate the mural, choose the colors for each object, and arrange the objects on the wall. Each child paints his or her own animal, but the group makes the decisions about where to place each object in relation to the others. The sea creatures are fanciful, imaginative, and vivid, painted in a combination of startlingly bright tropical colors.

## Homework: Where School Comes Home

As much as Luther enjoys painting the mural, he hates doing his homework, and by January, Mrs. Arjay came to school complaining to Mrs. Lynns that Luther's homework assignments were killing her and disrupting family life. Every night, Mrs. Arjay explains, she must interrupt her preparation of the family dinner to stand watch over Luther's shoulder to make sure he stays at his work; whenever she turns back to the stove, his head slumps on the kitchen table or he begins staring into space. Monitoring Luther is interfering with Mrs. Arjay's meal preparation, keeping her from attending meetings at the Kingdom Hall, and piling frustration on top of exhaustion. Is there anything Mrs. Lynns can do to help?

In her patient, gentle voice, Mrs. Lynns explains that homework assignments for her classroom should take no more than an hour. She understands that Luther is taking longer and promises that she will not "come down hard" on Luther if he does not turn all of his homework in on time. Loretta Howton enters the classroom and joins the conversation. When Loretta learns that part of the reason Luther takes so long to complete his assignments is that he dawdles while copying the textbook questions onto his homework paper in cursive script, she offers to help by having her secretarial staff duplicate the homework from the textbooks; this way Luther won't have to spend so much time copying the work. Although Mrs. Lynns likes children to practice their cursive writing while doing homework, she goes along with this suggestion.

Luther's work improved after this, even though he soon stopped bringing his books to the assistant principal's office to be copied. (When I notice him copying his assignments in his notebook and asked why he isn't taking advantage of Mrs. Howton's offer, he explains that his classmates are teasing him about getting preferential treatment.) Luther's attention to lessons improves, his grades improve, and his emotional tone lightens. By the time it is announced that his drawing, entitled "My Neighborhood," has captured top prize in a city-wide art competition sponsored by the Transit Authority, Luther has become something of a school celebrity. CES 518's corporate sponsor, Capital Re, even gives Luther a scholarship to pay for art lessons the following year.

## Getting to Know the Arjays

Curious to know more about Luther and his family, one spring day I offer to take the Arjay family either to an art museum or to a gallery in Soho—their choice. Mrs. Arjay agrees, and on the next school half day, we are on our way to visit the Guggenheim Museum. (I conclude that whether or not they enjoy the paintings, the children will enjoy the building. I am not sure if they would perceive Soho to be exciting or just weird.)

On the trip to the museum, over hamburgers at a nearby McDonald's (the children's choice), I tell Mrs. Arjay that I think it's taken a lot of courage for her to come to school and complain about her problems with Luther's homework. Smiling shyly, as she always does when she's praised, Mrs. Arjay explains that Luther's homework battles had become so draining that she was desperate for relief—and besides, she adds, she has plenty of support from the parent-teacher program she attends.

That was how I learned that Mrs. Arjay participated in a teacher/parent education program sponsored by the Lehman College Institute for Literacy Studies. Called the Elementary Teachers Network (ETN), the program taught fifteen CES 518 teachers and two parents how to understand children as unique learners. Mrs. Arjay tells me that she really liked the program, had learned to think of the teachers as her friends and allies, and had begun to dream about getting a college education for herself (the ETN program awarded parents college credits and teachers graduate credits). Gathering the courage to talk with Mrs. Lynns about homework misery was easier, Mrs. Arjay explained, because her ETN experience gave her confidence that Mrs. Lynns would receive her in a spirit of cooperation. She did not think of teachers as distant, alien authority figures anymore, as she had when she struggled through high school in the Bronx.

Mrs. Arjay's experience with ETN at CES 518 has impressed her so much, she tells me, that at the end of June, when Luther graduates from fifth grade, she is determined to enroll him in the best middle school she can find. Her new friends at the Institute for Literacy Studies are helping her, she tells me.

Mrs. Arjay is the only parent I have met from Mrs. Lynns' class who is actively seeking a middle school for her child with the hope of finding something better than what the local district chooses for them. I am so impressed that she is taking on this task that I immediately offer to help by introducing her to some of the school directors I know from my previous research on school reform. Specifically, I have in mind Jane Andrias, the director of Central Park East Elementary School in East Harlem. I know after all, that Jane is an art teacher—surely she will be interested in Luther's drawing. Furthermore, I think, Central Park East will welcome a parent as active and as dedicated as Mrs. Arjay.

The thought of introducing Mrs. Arjay to Jane Andrias filled me with pleasure. I could really do something to help Luther and his family, I think. But when I ask Mrs. Arjay where ETN is referring her, she tells me it is Central Park East. Her ETN teacher, Yvonne Smith, is on that school's staff, she explains, and Yvonne thinks Central Park East will be ideal for Luther.

I am stunned. Yvonne was one of the teachers I had admired most when I studied Central Park East years earlier. Mrs. Arjay knows Yvonne already; she doesn't need my help.

## Getting to Know the Elementary Teachers Network

Since I had no idea how Yvonne and ETN came to CES 518 (it did not fit my picture of the school, after all), I asked Mrs. Arjay to introduce me to the ETN staff the next time they were in the school. The following Wednesday, Mrs. Arjay introduced me to Barbara Batton, ETN's coordinator at CES 518, who explained that the Institute of Literacy Studies has a contract with District 9 to conduct teacher development courses at two district schools, including CES 518. The program had started out dealing exclusively with teachers, but during the 1996-97 school year, several parents were invited to join. Maria Arjay, Barbara explained, was one of ETN's most active participants; she was a parent involved in school affairs who was learning how to understand and support her children's learning and to work with her children's teachers. Maria Arjay, Barbara told me, had even attended a weekend retreat in upstate New York where the ETN staff, teachers, and parents worked intensely to learn the observational and descriptive techniques pioneered by Patricia Carini and her colleagues of the Prospect School in Vermont.

Yvonne Smith had gotten involved at CES 518, Barbara explained, because, as a veteran member of the Central Park East staff, she was a longtime practitioner of Prospect's methods. When the Institute for Literacy Studies established its program for teachers at CES 518, Yvonne Smith was hired to lead the class. Yvonne was so taken with Mrs. Arjay and her children that she was helping them apply for admission to Central Park East. Barbara was so taken with the Arjay family that she had arranged for Mrs. Arjay to enroll Luther in classes at the Art Students' League, where Barbara's grandson was enrolled. (Barbara and Maria met every Saturday morning while their children were taking art lessons on 57th Street.)

After I learned about Mrs. Arjay's participation in ETN, I assumed that ETN was primarily responsible for Luther's dramatic academic improvement in Mrs. Lynns' classroom. While Mrs. Arjay's participation in this small and special program had enabled her to help Luther, I reasoned, most parents of Mrs. Lynns' students were neither encouraged nor trained to participate in their children's education. ETN was an interesting phenomenon, I concluded, but isolated and atypical, not central to what CES 518 was about.

This conclusion reflected my erroneous assumption that CES 518 was a relatively "typical" school rather than one deeply engaged in the process of reform. My mistake only became clear to me the following winter after I asked Mrs. Arjay what I thought was an innocuous question: How did you get involved in ETN in the first place? Her answer contradicted my assumption that ETN was atypical of CES 518's program because Mrs. Arjay told me that participating in a different parent education program at CES 518 first brought her to ETN. It seems that when Luther's younger brother Jean was in pre-kindergarten, Mrs. Arjay would come to school at 9:00 a.m. and, rather than return home only to return at 11:00 when preschool ended, she stayed in the mini-school for a parent education program that CES 518 ran for mothers of pre-K students. In this wonderful program, Mrs. Arjay tells me, she learned how to play with her children, make books with them, and read to them in ways that supported their learning.

The following year, Mrs. Arjay began helping Jean's kindergarten teacher organize classroom activities and assisted the school's social worker by providing Spanish-English translations. Workshops on health, nutrition, disease prevention, and learning disabilities, brought to CES 518 on a grant initiated by the principal, were an additional inducement to keep Mrs. Arjay at the school. So was the parent association, which has its own office from which fund-raisers are planned, trips are organized, and new programs are discussed and initiated. One day the social worker, who had become a friend, invited Mrs. Arjay to join a program called ETN. Along with one of the Parent Association officers, she agreed to enroll.

When I finally understood that ETN is not isolated but is indeed consistent with the principals' efforts to involve parents in the school, I decided to make sense of what I have learned. Previously, I had assumed that CES 518 was different from the other schools my colleagues on the research team were studying because it presented formal and informal barriers that kept parents from getting close to the school and its staff. Instead, I now understand, CES 518 is using some of the same parent involvement programs as our three other study schools. Indeed, when we organized a meeting in February 1998, to do a descriptive review of a student at our research site in Manhattan, it turned out that two of the participants we invited, Yvonne Smith, the Central Park East teacher leading ETN at CES 518, and Diane, the classroom teacher we are observing at P.S. 3, had worked together to learn Prospect's methods twenty years earlier!

By the time I learned of Yvonne and Diane's connection, I had completed three months of the ETN curriculum and had fallen under its spell. More than twenty of us gathered in a second grade classroom in the annex of CES 518 in October, when the first ETN session began. Most were teachers at CES 518, most were relatively new, and most taught younger children—kindergarten through second grade. One of these teachers was my stepson, José, who was teaching for the first time that fall. But there were others present who were more veteran and who taught older children. Among them were Clarissa's reading teacher and two third grade teachers whose classrooms adjoined Mrs. Lynns'. In addition to the teachers, three parents, one paraprofessional, and one school secretary were in attendance.

About half were Black and half were Hispanic. I am a White, Jewish college professor with no formal connections to the school. Barbara Batton (of Japanese-American descent) and Yvonne Smith (an African American) led the group, as they had the year Maria participated.

Barbara and Yvonne started off low-key with lots of administrative details to carry out; papers were passed around with instructions about notebooks to buy and note-taking procedures to follow. There was soda, juice, cookies, fruits, and cheese for everyone—and we received assignments to bring snacks to succeeding meetings according to a schedule. For a while, cramped at the tiny desk, I wondered if we would ever get around to talking about teaching and learning.

Finally, Yvonne began to do her magic. She told us to write down what we remembered from our own experiences with literacy. What did we read when we were children? What reading materials were there in the house? What kinds of signs did we see in the neighborhood? Who read to us? What did they read? As Yvonne's voice droned hypnotically, I began to visualize myself at ages four and five in the garden apartment development that was my first real home. I thought of the picture books my parents showed me, with words I memorized until I could recite entire books while turning pages at just the right moments. I thought of the signs along the Interboro Parkway that we took on the way to visit my grandparents who lived on the Eastern Parkway in Brownsville. I thought of the signs in Hebrew on the Orthodox synagogues and those of the Hasidim, who seemed so alien they made me wonder what it meant to be Jewish. I thought of the sameness of my Queens neighborhood, just recently converted from farming, where all the buildings were brick, all the faces were White, and all the names were from Eastern Europe, like my own.

Yvonne awakened me from my reverie thirty minutes later, announcing that it was time for us to share our reflections. We split into two groups of ten; my group moved to the room next door, where after considerable snacking, stretching, and milling about, we began to read our recollections to each other. There was something intimate about the talk as people read stories about their parents, grandparents, brothers, and sisters. We visited San Juan and Santo Domingo, Harlem, a California internment camp (where Barbara had spent her childhood), and the rural South. While the locales varied and the plots diverged, there was a constant: reading became important in all of our lives, a source of pleasure, a place of connection and retreat, an important tool for playing and growing.

By the time our hour of sharing was up, the ten of us had come to know each other in a deeply personal way. The differences in our backgrounds and status faded against the experience of shared memory. I felt stunned at how powerful the practice of small group reflection could be. Immediately, I began adapting ETN techniques to my own college classrooms.

At subsequent sessions, as fall gave way to winter, we moved from reflecting on our own learning experiences to focusing on children's learning. Each of us was

asked to select a study subject, a child with whom we had worked. Our task was to observe what the child actually did, how the child read, what questions the child asked, what the child was interested in, what writing and painting the child produced. Drawing on the writings of Patricia Carini, Deborah Meier, and others in our ETN course book, we learned to appreciate children's strengths, respect their thinking processes, pay attention to the details of their work and play, and collaborate together to gain multiple perspectives on an individual child.

To provide us with guidance and inspiration, some of the ETN veterans led descriptive reviews, where all of us looked at specific pieces of a child's work and pointed out detail after detail until we saw the work in all its complexity as the expression of an individual child. The descriptive review process was a formal discipline. A presenter always led off, selecting for group reflection a word that the child used, or a word often used by people who interact with the child. Participants silently reflected on the word for several minutes, searching for associations, memories, definitions, and personal experiences related to it. This group reflection was a warming up exercise, like those actors might use to prepare for a rehearsal. It freed the imagination, put us in touch with our own experiences as a child, created an intimacy with the other participants, reminded us that there are many different ways of perceiving the same phenomenon, and enabled us to understand how it helps us to perceive things through the lenses of other people's experiences and cultures.

After we had done our group word reflection, the presenter described the child according to five dimensions: Physical Presence and Gesture, Disposition, Relationships with Children and Adults, Interests and Activities, and Formal Learning. Great care was taken to avoid making judgments or interpretations—it was too early in the process for that; we didn't want to bias the way we saw the child's work.

Then came the centerpiece of the review; our shared observation of a child's work. The presenter selected one or two homework assignments, journal entries, or drawings done by the child under review. Each participant spent a few minutes looking carefully at the child's work, noting the content, form, style, words, and affect. Then each participant took turns, bringing to the group's attention one feature of the child's work. After we listened to each other and discovered new facets of the work before us, our habit of drawing quick conclusions, injecting unwarranted value judgments, and of turning away to "more important things" than a child's work gave way.[17]

By April, we were writing and sharing our own child's studies. I presented my own study of Joseph, my ten-year-old son. I described his difficulties sitting in his chair in the early grades, his teachers' inclination to label him as needing help,

[17]For a thick description of a descriptive review, see "'I **Knowed** That Before You Said It': The Descriptive Review of a Child," by David Carroll, in *Changing Minds*, Bulletin 13, Spring 1998, Michigan State University College of Education.

the contrast between his problems in school and his prodigious learning campaigns at home. The boy who doesn't like to listen to instructions from his teacher is the same little genius who researches dinosaurs and natural disasters; becomes an expert on the Titanic, the Hindenburg, and the Lusitania; puzzles over the assassinations of Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Robert F. Kennedy, and John Lennon; and sounds out the melody of "Nearer My God to Thee" on his violin. My reflection on Joseph's development helped me see how my parenting was modeled on that of my father, how my research and college teaching built on and reinforced my father's lessons.

After I presented my child study, Clara Diaz, the principal's secretary, presented a study of her granddaughter, a student at CES 518. While Clara and I both picked loved ones to write about, our descriptions could not have been more different, for Joseph and Lianna are learners with the most dissimilar styles and temperaments.

## Educating Maria as a Parent and Teacher

The process I went through at ETN was the same as that experienced by Maria the previous year. She did the same reflections on her childhood, did her own studies of her children, and shared intimate memories with CES 518 teachers, parents, and staff. Most important to Maria's growth was the experience of presenting a descriptive review of her son Jean, with Jean's teacher.

When Mrs. Arjay began ETN, her middle son, Jean, was having a difficult time in school. It took him forty minutes to copy a sentence, he wasn't learning to read, and he was retained in first grade. Maria was losing patience with Jean, yelled at him, even spanked him, and still Jean's reading did not improve.

Through ETN, Maria met Jean's teacher and requested her as Jean's teacher when he repeated first grade. As they began working together to prepare the descriptive review of Jean, Maria realized that she had been concentrating on his deficits rather than his strengths. She began writing, in English, a description of Jean as he appeared at home, and she found it difficult. "I've always been afraid of writing," Mrs. Arjay explains. "When I start writing, the words disappear." For three nights before she and Jean's teacher were to "present" Jean at the ETN conference, Maria was so nervous she can't sleep.

"That's when the wonders began," Maria recalls. By sharing her knowledge of Jean with his teacher and the ETN participants, Maria began to see Jean's strengths—how he loves to help others, how he is willing to share, how he loves to make things with his hands and to build things. Recognizing Jean's strengths enabled Mrs. Arjay to stop yelling at him, to stop pressuring him to do better in the things in which he has trouble, and to begin praising him for the many things at

which he excels. Maria tells me that while her participation in ETN has helped her with Luther by giving her the confidence to approach Mrs. Lynns and ask her for help with her homework misery, her ETN experience has helped her even more with Jean, whose learning problems are much more severe.

By the end of Maria's first year at ETN, she is taking college courses; working as a nutrition counselor; enrolling her children at Central Park East, where Jean is getting reading help from Alice Seletsky, a gifted and veteran teacher; and chauffeuring Luther and his brothers to two sets of art lessons—not only Saturday mornings at the Art Students League but also Thursday afternoons with Sheila Lamb, a print maker and art teacher at the Dalton School, a woman I had suggested would be a good teacher for Luther.

Furthermore, during the second year of my study, while I am interviewing Maria about her experience as a parent at CES 818, I recognize that she can tell her story in a more dramatic and convincing fashion than I can. While I prepared to give an academic presentation on homework in Mrs. Lynns' classroom at an anthropology conference, I decided that it would be far more effective for Maria to tell the story about how she came to school to plead for relief from homework than it would for me to tell her story. My research team agreed; we invited parents, students, and teachers from all four schools to participate in our presentation at the Urban Ethnography Forum at the University of Pennsylvania.

Although we knew that we wanted our study subjects to participate in the presentation, we did not know what we wanted to say. At our first meeting, I tried to present the theoretical perspective that caused us to organize a session on homework, something about how homework was the place that school and family came together. I did not get three sentences out before Diane, the second-third grade teacher from P.S. 3, interrupted me to challenge my perspective. For a moment, we were at an impasse. Did we really agree on anything? Did we have anything to say? Then we began again by telling each other stories about our own experience with homework. We used the reflective process upon which Prospect and ETN are based, and the process saved us. Our presentation at the Ethnography Forum was a great success; and, for me, Maria's account of how CES 518's parent-education programs have empowered her to support her children's learning was a high point of the session.

Luther and his brothers were in the audience as their mother addressed the assembled teachers and professors. Luther's father, Donald, proudly video recorded the session. For the Arjays, Maria's participation in an academic conference was a family affair, a two-hour car trip, a night in a motel, an afternoon exploring Philadelphia. I served as tour guide, showing them sites that were special to me, and they drove me home to New Jersey after the conference ended. Mr. and Mrs. Arjay met my wife, and the three boys had a joyous afternoon with my son Joseph, playing tackle football with Joseph's dog. (They could never touch him.) By the end of

the weekend, my family and the Arjays knew each other. We had crossed the boundary between professional relationship and personal friendship.

## My Reflections

Getting to know the Arjay family changed the way I understood Luther's experience. I learned that Luther's progress in fifth grade grew out of decades of educational innovation—CES 518's parent education and involvement programs, the ETN program, the Prospect Center, Central Park East elementary school, Mrs. Gordon's art classes, the Arts Connection program, Mrs. Lynns' gentle caring, my father's brand of parenting, and my own involvement in the study and practice of educational reform—all of these together helped bring Luther in from the margins, out of the shadows, and into full engagement in his fifth grade classroom.

Luther's growth came about because his mother supported him, because his mother worked with his teachers, because his mother applied what she was learning at ETN about how people learn. His progress was fueled by Mrs. Gordon's praise, by the pleasure he drew from doing his art work, by the sense of mastery he developed. The classroom that Mrs. Lynns and I created contributed to Luther's growth as well. He received compassionate, but firm, direction from Mrs. Lynns and plenty of individual attention from both of us, made possible because two adults were on hand to help thirty children; and he enjoyed stimulation of his musical imagination from my ad hoc music program. CES 518, with its parent involvement and education program, its ETN and Arts Connection grant programs, and its dedicated teaching staff, deserves much of the credit as well.

Thus, I can say that getting to know the Arjay family changed the way I understood CES 518. My time in the classroom impressed me with how guardians like Sister Sara are removed from the school community and how intimidating school could be to Clarissa's and Lisette's mothers. CES 518 had seemed like a school separated from the community by language, culture, and social class, by forbidding school structures, and by the New York City public school bureaucracy. And yet, for the Arjay family, CES 518 was welcoming, a community center with services and educational programs that not only helped Luther and Jean and Lionel, but enriched Maria's life as well.

I now see CES 518 as a more complex and contradictory institution than I ever imagined: a supportive, friendly environment for some members of the Morrisania community, a frightening alienating place for others. By now, it is clear to me that CES 518's leadership is consciously trying to encourage and support parental involvement; at the same time, many parents continue to receive the opposite message. The unevenness of CES 518's efforts to bridge the gap between school and community undermines some efforts that are not only well-intentioned but often, as with ETN, brilliantly executed.

# Conclusion: Cultural Interchange

Each student in Mrs. Lynns' class has a unique story. Some are as troubling as Nicole's and Clarissa's, others are as positive as Luther's. In most of the stories, however, the process of interchange unfolded in a similar pattern.

1. *Setting the Stage.* The school made parents feel welcome through letters sent home with their children, through parent education and GED and ESL programs, by supporting the Parents' Association, and by inviting parents to accompany trips. (CES 518 did not set the stage effectively with Sister Sara, who was occupied running her mission and also suffering health problems; however, Sister Sara did form a positive impression of the school during the year when Nicole and her sister were living with a family friend half a block from the school).
2. *Building Trusting Relationships.* The teachers (Mrs. Lynns and I) established trusting relationships with the children and their families during time spent together in and out of the classroom and during private lunches; at formal parent-teacher meetings and informal discussions during class hours; on school trips; and at incidental meetings in front of the school at the end of the day and during home visits.
3. *Getting to Know Each Other.* As we developed trusting relationships, we learned a great deal about what we had in common and where we were different. (I should note that Mrs. Lynns was much less inclined to share her private side with students than I was mine. For example, she was deeply involved in the theater, played chess and piano, and was active in her church, but she never revealed these interests and involvements).
4. *Building Bridges.* Children began bringing to school some of their interests and concerns from their homes and sharing some aspects of the school's program with their families.
5. *Self-Expression at School.* When children experienced the freedom to express important ideas and feelings through such activities as art,

> music, dance, writing, story telling, debate, and cheerleading, it reinforced their sense that family and school could be connected and that school could be a place where they could be themselves, without holding back or compartmentalizing themselves. For the children in Mrs. Lynns' class, chorus performances, participation in the Arts Connection mural painting program, cheerleading, writing essays for holiday bulletin boards or for Black History Month and Women's History Month, drawing pictures in art class, and learning African dances in another Arts Connection program were all prominent examples of opportunities for self-expression.

The process of cultural interchange did not proceed nearly as far with some students as it did with others, such as Luther and Lisette. In some cases, the barriers to interchange interfered with the process, causing people on both sides of the cultural divide to learn less from each other and frustrated their ability to work with each other to support student learning.

As an example, the relationship of Clarissa and her family to CES 518 represents a case of much less interchange. Clarissa withheld a great deal of herself from school: she tried to keep the details of her family life secret; she wouldn't take academic risks; and she concealed her inability to do required work as best she could. Her self-effacement and sweetness enabled her not to be seen and known as well as other students, thus her need for help was unmet for a long time. On her part, Mrs. Ruiz always appeared anxious in school. She spoke softly and shyly with teachers, attended only a few voluntary programs, and spent little time with Clarissa on her homework. Her values, interests, and strengths were rarely evidenced at CES 518.

Many of the school's programs did not reach Clarissa and her family. Some of the barriers were obvious: the requirement to write in cursive script, the fifteen-minute unscheduled parent meetings, large class sizes, sketchy report cards, lack of day care. Other barriers took more scrutiny to appreciate; for example, the prescribed curriculum limited teachers' ability to engage with individual students about their interests. The competitiveness of the school ethos forced many students to close themselves off for fear of being excluded or rejected.

Combined, these barriers created a situation where what was central to Clarissa's life (that is, her sense of connectedness with her family and her sense of identity, responsibility, and inclusion) looked, from the school's vantage point, more as a barrier than a resource to her learning. School personnel saw her family as not providing warm clothing and academic support, not ensuring her health and getting her to school on time, and finally, not being aggressive advocates for her. Clarissa's desire to help her mother take care of family members was perceived not as an opportunity to engage her active learning, but rather as a distraction from academic study. Clarissa's desire to be a successful Latina woman who was caring, nurturing, sensitive, responsible, gregarious, popular, and lively was seen not as some-

thing drawing her into the life of the school, but rather as something that enabled her to hide her academic problems. Since Clarissa fit in well, got along with her peers, did not disrupt classes, behaved respectfully to authority—because she was a good girl on her way to being a successful Latina woman, she was able to make herself invisible.[18]

This same ability to hide by going along with the school's program was exercised by Nicole and Clarissa. Unlike her sister Xenia, Nicole rarely acted out, often hid her thoughts behind a superficial smile, and tried to fit in with her peer group. As a result, Xenia got more attention from teachers, counselors, and administrators. Nicole's depression and/or sadness usually was not sufficiently vivid to demand attention.

Because I was an "extra" adult in the classroom, without the responsibility for maintaining order or delivering instruction, I was free to pick up the signs that Clarissa and Nicole were so good at hiding, and usually I shared what I learned with Mrs. Lynns and other school personnel. Similarly, because the Federal research grant paid me to visit students' homes, and because I had money to reimburse families for participating, I was able to spend time, communicate, get to know, and develop relationships with parents and siblings who often remained unknown to the school.

One obvious conclusion my experience suggests is that it's easier to cross cultural boundaries when you reduce the teacher-student ratio. When Mrs. Lynns had to work alone with thirty-one children, including many in great emotional distress, it was hard to do more than maintain control and teach to the group as a whole. When my presence doubled the proportion of adults in the classroom, I was able to keep an eye on children who were not doing work, who were only pretending to keep up, or who were concerned with other things.

But my role in the world of Mrs. Lynns' classroom was more than simply being an additional adult body. When I participated in class, or interacted with the students' families, I presented myself as a person, a father, husband, and brother-in-law rather than simply as an expert, or a professional. I talked about my son, my wife, my parents, my musical tastes, my enjoyment of various cuisines, and I focused on my developing relationship with the students and their families rather than on my need to gather information for my study.

In some ways, my interactions with students and parents resembled the parent-teacher interactions modeled by the ETN program in which Maria Arjay participated. The parents and teachers in ETN shared memories, told each other sto-

[18]Rosa Maria Gil and Carmen Inoa Vazquez (1996). *The Maria Paradox: How Latinas Can Merge Old World Traditions with New World Self-esteem.* New York: G. P. Putman's Sons.

ries, developed relationships, and worked with each other more on the basis of equality and mutual interest than on the basis of unequal authority and status.

My participation in ETN during the year following my time spent in Mrs. Lynns' classroom convinces me that the kind of equalizing relationships built into ETN practice, combined with paying close attention to children's work, provides a metaphor for how teachers and parents can go about increasing cultural interchange to support student learning. At CES 518, ETN was a separate program involving primarily teachers of the youngest children and a few of their parents. When I was there, it was not integrated into the whole of the school community, nor were there plans to increase participating parents greatly. Nevertheless, my experience with ETN at CES 518 suggests that if schools adopt programs that enable parents and teachers to work closely together on the basis of relative equality, mutual respect, and valuing difference and help teachers and parents learn more about the needs, strengths, interests, and learning styles of each individual student, then schools can overcome some of the barriers to cultural interchange.

Describing the process of cultural interchange in this way, however, does not erase the uncertainty of what lies ahead, for cultural interchange is always a walk in the dark. The knowledge it brings challenges our capacity to observe in fresh ways through the eyes of our students, their parents, their teachers, and our colleagues.

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